

Alec Weissman

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State of the Students

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First and foremost, I want to thank Student Trustee Weikl and Alternative Student Trustee Geerlof for having me here today. I firmly appreciate the hard work that you both put into not only planning Higher Education Awareness Week, but your work with the College Advocates Supporting Higher Education Committee as well, including the bi-weekly articles that the committee publishes in the Ramapo News. You are both great advocates for higher education, and tremendous representatives of Ramapo College.

Upon being elected as President of the Student Government Association here at Ramapo, one of the primary goals which I set out to accomplish was the maintaining of a more open and transparent dialogue between our campus's 6000+ students and our administration, faculty and staff. In previous years, the communication between both parties was at times lacking and rather unproductive, however, I feel as though we have been particularly successful in our dialogue throughout the 2015-2016 academic year. I harken this communicative success back to September, with the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding by President Mercer, Student Government Association Vice President Erin McKenna, and myself. This Memorandum holds both the Student Government Association, as representatives of the student body, and President Mercer, as a representative for faculty and administration, responsible for being upfront, honest, and straightforward with one another in regards to issues on campus or any other matters of pertinence to students. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding set the proper tone for

the year, and has certainly contributed to better communication between members of the Ramapo student community and administration.

I would also like to thank President Mercer and the college's administration as a collective whole for their efforts and willingness to have open dialogue and communication with students through not only the signing of a single document, but through persistent and extensive effort and action. This persistent effort is exemplified by a Student Leaders Dinner which took place in early December of 2015. Attendance at this dinner consisted of over twenty student leaders from various factions of campus, including Athletics, the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, and the Center for Student Involvement to name a few, along with President Mercer, Chief of Staff Brittany Williams-Goldstein, and Vice President Chris Romano. In being at the event, student leaders were able to discuss issues of relevance to not only the groups of students whom they were representing, but the general student body as a whole, while also having the opportunity to ask questions of those administrative members in attendance, with some questions ranging from matters of public safety in the Village to workout space for varsity athletes in the Bradley Center and much in between. We understand that having one dinner with administration will not necessarily be able to make substantial change on our campus, but this is certainly a major step in the right direction, with dialogue acting as a way to make build on and further strengthen the student-administration relationship. I have discussed the matter with President Mercer individually, and we both see the successes in having events of such a nature, with the hope being that more will be held in the near future, however, I encourage students to continue to voice their opinions and perspectives on campus and to collaborate with the SGA on initiatives that will improve our campus.

Student leaders are an integral part of any college campus, and it is important to note the impact that student leadership and engagement have had not only on our Ramapo campus but the surrounding community as a whole. As student leaders, we have the ability to positively influence the lives of many, and fortunately we attend an institution that grants students an equal opportunity to strengthen and act on their leadership interests and abilities. I think that a prime example of this opportunity to lead is evidenced by the development of new clubs during this academic year. Up to this point, there have been 12 new clubs approved by the Student Government's Senate, ultimately allowing for a multitude of new student leaders to develop and become more impactful at Ramapo. I want every student in the audience to understand that you do not necessarily have to be a club or organizational president to make a difference and lead, but can lead through much smaller acts. One can attend speeches and presentations given on campus, such as that given by New Jersey state Senator Nellie Pou yesterday, or simply cast a vote in the Student Government Association elections that will take place later on in the semester as ways of exemplifying leadership, however, I stand firm in my belief that we must continue to develop and exploit our collective leadership abilities as a student body. Without student leadership, students will lose their collective voice and influence at Ramapo and we cannot allow for this to happen. Lead in any way that you are capable and make a difference.

The SGA is comprised of students who exemplify tremendous leadership, dedicating their time to leading their fellow students, while improving the undergraduate experience as a whole. One of these individual's is the Salemeno School of Humanities and Global Studies School Senator, David Gardy Ermann. In his position, David has successfully planned a multitude of events pertaining to the Ramapo student body, with examples of such events including two trips to College Affordability Study Commission Hearings, which President

Mercer himself sits on, at Union County College in September and The College of New Jersey in November of 2015, respectively. Dave helped bring approximately 10 students to each hearing, in which they had the opportunity to speak to the Commission on the importance of college affordability in their own lives. College affordability is certainly a huge issue, and one of the reasons why we are having Higher Education Awareness Week in the first place. Students need to be cognizant of the issues facing college affordability and Dave planning trips to hearings on the matter only increase awareness. Dave was also successful in his planning of the Political Candidates Forum in October. He was able to bring 6 Assembly candidates to campus, with Democrats and Republicans both represented, with students able to have an open forum and discussion with members of both political parties. It is imperative that we at Ramapo continue to place emphasis on the important topic of civic engagement following an event such as the Political Candidates Forum. I do not ask that students are heavily involved and engrained in the political spectrum or even associated with a particular party, but I do think that as college students should be aware of political issues that will strongly influence our lives in both the present and future. As all of you know, we will be electing a new President in November, with college students certainly having a big say in determining who our next commander in chief will be. Of course I would like for my fellow students to vote, but I understand that this is not achievable. However, at a minimum, we should know the matters being discussed. And finally, David, along with SGA Senator at-large Victoria Levering, have been serving on the Library Renovations Task Force over the past couple of months.

Along with SSHGS School Senator Ermann, the School of Theoretical and Applied Sciences School Senator Rich Apramian is certainly worthy of recognition for his hard work to this point. In November, Rich, along with Dean Saiff of TAS, were successful in the planning

and execution of a town hall event for students currently studying within the school. Those in attendance were able to speak with the Dean in an open forum environment, being given the opportunity to ask questions or voice concerns about the state of TAS. I am not a student in TAS, yet in the time that I sat and listened to members of the TAS community speak, I quickly came to understand the passion that each have for their school and areas of study. Questions regarding lab credits and study space were all brought forth by students, and as president of the SGA I would strongly encourage that these same students come and talk to us in the organization. We have a position in the organization, the Secretary of Academic Affairs, whose job is solely to focus on academics in relation to the student body, and I can assure you that they would love to discuss TAS matters at greater length with those in the school. For the spring semester, Rich is developing what is going to be known as the Ramapo Alumni with Science Experience, or R.A.S.E. Panel, in which recently graduated alumni both currently or formally working in any field related to TAS will have the opportunity to network with current TAS students. The Panel will take place in late March or early April, with current Panel members include a dentist with a private practice, an engineer from the Department of Defense, and a doctor who is currently a Radiology Resident. I am confident that the R.A.S.E. Panel will be an immense success and help forge connections for students planning to one day enter the science-based work force. I hope that one day in the near future, all of our five schools will have similar panels to that which Rich has planned, as the importance of networking in the lives of college students cannot be understated. Entering the work-force without connections is without a doubt exponentially more challenging than coming in with connections, and we need to ensure that our students have an advantage following graduation from Ramapo. Again, I applaud Rich on a job well-done up to this point, and look forward to seeing what he can accomplish during the remainder of the year.

Senator at-Large Sarah Brown is an SGA member who has grown immensely in her time with the organization, accomplishing a great deal in only her first year with the organization. As liaison to the Cahill Center, Sarah has worked diligently in efforts to strengthen the connection between career advisors and students. A prime example of this strengthened connection includes career advisors now attending all first year seminar classes and meeting the first-year students whom they will be advising. The building of a student and career advisor relationship in the first year of study is in my opinion critical to one's success, for while some believe that focus on career development does not begin until one's sophomore or junior year, it truly begins the minute that a student steps on Ramapo's campus. Students are always thinking about their future plans in regards to prospective careers, and I firmly believe that career advisor in FYS classes will only serve to benefit students later on down the road when looking for careers and job opportunities. Sarah is also working to develop a focus group whose goal is to gauge how students feel about their career assessment as a whole, with the goal to have the initial meeting in late March or early April. Focus groups such as these are pertinent to all Ramapo students, as student opinion on career assessment will determine the future ways in which the Cahill Center and students are going to interact and work with one another in the future. If students are not pleased, something will need to be changed, while if the focus groups are received positively then we know that we are in a good place in terms of career assessment and outlook. I am interested to see where all of these endeavors lead, and am confident that they will both be successful and beneficial to the student body.

One of the key initiatives that the SGA had, and continues to have, at the top of our priority list is the building of school spirit. We feel as though there is great potential at Ramapo for the development of a culture and identity, similar to that held by student bodies at larger

institutions. This development will not be easy, but I think that we have taken the right steps in slowly but surely cultivating a campus community in which there is pride and enthusiasm. I would like to contribute much in the way of this development to the hard work of the Student Government Association's Secretary of Programming, Mike Thum. Mike, along with Anisfield School Senator Jeremy Barbara and Treasurer Alex Cardazzi, were integral in making our Oktoberfest event the success that was in this past year. Attendance at Oktoberfest was substantially higher than it had been in previous years, and I truly believe that the student body had a great weekend of fun activities and events. In being present at the weekend's events, it was evident that students genuinely enjoyed themselves and were proud to be at Ramapo, something that we are certainly pleased with and hope to continue. Mike is also in the process of planning the End of The Year Concert to take place in May. I have full confidence that this year's concert will match, and hopefully exceed, the successes of last year, and look forward to another awesome event for our student body to enjoy. It is important to note, however, that our collective culture will not only be developed solely from the attending of large campus-wide events, but will truly be the result of student involvement in smaller events that take place on a weekly basis. Examples of this include the attending of sporting events, such as the men's basketball playoff game that took place this past weekend, in which upwards of 230 students were in attendance all wearing maroon and cheering on our team. The men's volleyball team is also in season at this point in time, and although I may be biased as a former member of the team, I suggest going to their matches as well. I believe that events such as these will help to make "Ramapo Pride" a reality in the future. We cannot continue to sit in our rooms on the weekends and act as though there is nothing to do, because this is simply not reality. Go out, get involved, and have fun.

I would now like to shift attention away from acts of leadership and individual accolades, and instead focus on a few of the key issues from the previous semester, the SGA response, and how we as an organization and student body should address such issues during the current semester. I will begin by focusing on sexual assault and violence on Ramapo's campus. As we are all aware, there were multiple incidents of alleged sexual assault that took place on our campus during the first semester. Acts of this nature are completely unacceptable and hold no place at our institution. In responding to the sexual assaults, the Student Government Association has published articles in the Ramapo News reinforcing our support for the victims of sexual assault, written letters in support of important events such as Violence Awareness Week in October, and penned articles stating our firm belief in the It's On Us Campaign and Ramapledge that were put into action during the 2014-2015 academic year. We as a student body must understand that it we can publish articles and write letters as often as we may choose, but it truly is our responsibility as students to act and ensure that all students are protected and safe on our campus. It was individuals associated with Ramapo who committed these crimes, and it is our responsibility to protect our fellow Ramapo students from those with similar intentions. In going forward, The Student Government Association hopes to continue to hold a strong relationship with the Women's Center and the great people that work there, along with Kat McGee, an individual who has worked tirelessly with us in the fight against sexual assault. These relationships and our collective dedication to ensuring that our campus is safe and violence-free will help us to make Ramapo a place where all can feel safe and protected, but remember that we as a whole student body will be able to do more than one organization or individual ever could. This campus belongs to every student, and every student deserves to be protected and safe at Ramapo.

The issue of racial inclusion and diversity has also been a prominent issue on not only Ramapo's campus, but college campuses across the United States. Following the events that took place at the University of Missouri in December, Black Student Union President Brittany Jordan and I wrote a collaborative letter in support of racial diversity and inclusion at Ramapo, noting the small percentage of minority students on our campus while also stating our support for those at Mizzou speaking out against racism. This letter was subsequently published in the Ramapo News and from what I have been told, positively received by students, faculty, and administration. However, it is our job as a student body to ensure that issues such as racial inclusion and diversity are not spoken of briefly and then quickly forgotten. Dialogue must be consistent and maintained by all of us here at the college, and I personally feel as though we in the SGA did not do a good enough job of doing this during the fall semester. We as an organization need to do more, and I am hopeful and confident that we will be more active in this regard during the remaining two months of this semester. I am not certain of the best way to go about enacting such activity, but I strongly encourage any students with ideas to come and speak to the SGA. We are open to any and all ideas on the improvement of racial diversity and inclusion on our campus, and are willing to work hard to make this change occur.

With everything being said, I want to state that I am supremely pleased and confident with not only the Student Government Association, but the student body in its entirety. We have a great deal of invested students here, a ton of potential, and much to look forward to. Some key events that the SGA will be having during the remaining spring semester include the annual Run with Color. This event is being planned by Student Governor Megan Patel and Alternate Student Government Princep Shah, and will be taking place in mid-April. In April, the SGA will also be holding its elections for the 2016-2017 academic year. I encourage that those students interested

in running do run, as it is a great organization to be a part of. For those of you not interested in running, please vote. To Student Trustee Weikl and Alternate Student Trustee Geerlof, I again thank you for having me today. And to all in attendance, thank you for caring about the state of our students.