Administrators at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute violated the basic principles of shared governance in suspending its Faculty Senate after clashing with it over the voting rights of non-tenure-track "clinical faculty" members, an investigative committee of the American Association of University Professors concludes in a new report.

The report, released today, also argues that a "transitional" faculty-governance structure established by the administration after its 2007 suspension of the senate "has failed in multiple ways" to meet AAUP standards and has left the private technological university "without a legitimate faculty governance structure."

"As of this writing, Rensselaer continues to operate without an independent, self-determining body of faculty governance, and, without such a body, neither the faculty nor the board has a constitutional mechanism for compromise," says the report, which notes that the institute's Board of Trustees has not met with representatives of the Faculty Senate for several years.

The university, in Troy, N.Y., declined on Tuesday to comment on the pending AAUP report. In a letter cited in the report itself, Rensselaer's general counsel, Charles Carletta, responded to a draft version of the document by saying it "contains several factual errors, many relevant omissions, and much speculative comment, which may easily have influenced the erroneous conclusions reached." He declined, however, to offer specifics because, he said, Rensselaer "has never recognized the role of the AAUP in what we regard as an internal issue."

The report quotes Mr. Carletta's letter as saying he was pleased to
inform the AAUP that a committee involving the provost and elected faculty leaders is drafting what it regards as a new governance plan that will be acceptable to both Rensselaer's governing board and faculty.

In a response to Mr. Carletta's letter quoted in the report, officers of the university's AAUP chapter characterized the investigative committee's findings as "an accurate, trenchant analysis of our situation" and recalled three recent unsuccessful efforts by the faculty "to return to a constitutionally sanctioned governance structure."

Longstanding Conflict

The findings of the AAUP's investigative panel, and Rensselaer's response, represent just the latest round of volleys exchanged between the association and the university in recent years. The association first began calling for the reinstatement of Rensselaer's Faculty Senate weeks after its suspension in August 2007, and has similarly challenged the university over other moves. Those include a 2008 decision to deny a newly retired professor continued access to a university e-mail account, a move that the AAUP said was based on objections to the content of his messages.

Rensselaer had experienced 15 years marked by tensions between its faculty and administration and turnover in its presidency before its current president, Shirley Ann Jackson, took the job in 1999. Although Ms. Jackson was welcomed by faculty members at first, by 2006 she was the subject of a no-confidence vote that narrowly failed. She continues to come under fire from many faculty members there for her management style and compensation from the university. She also has supporters on the faculty, however, who credit her with improvements such as marked growth in the institution's faculty, endowment, and funds for research.

Tensions between Ms. Jackson and faculty leaders reached a head in 2006, when the faculty overwhelming approved a recommendation to the administration and governing board to enlarge the membership and voting population of the Faculty Senate by expanding its definition of faculty to include clinical faculty members. The university's board not only rejected the idea, it also voted to restrict its definition of faculty to include only tenured or tenure-track professors and directed the Faculty Senate
to amend its constitution accordingly, thereby threatening the presence of research faculty, archivists, librarians, and others on the faculty body. When the Faculty Senate refused to go along, the board agreed to suspend the Faculty Senate at the recommendation of President Jackson and the university's provost, Robert Palazzo.

The AAUP report issued today characterizes the board and administration's unilateral decision to suspend the Faculty Senate as unjustified, and it disputes several of the reasons Mr. Palazzo offered in proposing such a step.

It argues that the transitional governance structure subsequently established at Rensselaer does not afford the faculty an adequate role in decisions related to academic matters, and gives the administration too much power in selecting faculty representatives on committees. And it says the board and administration did not have a legitimate basis for rejecting the Faculty Senate's proposal to extend voting rights to clinical faculty members who had been expressing concern about their lack of status at the institution.