INSTITUTIONAL OVERVIEW

The University of Rhode Island is a dramatically different institution today than the one that underwent NEASC accreditation review a decade ago. Sustained strategic effort and focus has resulted in systemic transformation relative to finances; facilities; faculty; student quality, diversity and success; academic programs and research; teaching and learning modalities, and the internationalization of the University. Importantly, URI has embraced a renewed culture of achievement and focus on quality as evidenced by the noteworthy enhancement in the academic profile and selectivity of entering students, a major strategic investment in new full-time faculty positions, record-breaking growth in our Honors Program, and a renewed commitment to shared governance as shared responsibility for the health and well-being of the University. As an institution, we have moved from blaming dwindling state funding for our difficulties to recognizing that we are a tuition-dependent institution that must shape our own destiny. That destiny is defined by our vision and created by our investments in quality programs, innovation, and interdisciplinary learning and discovery that engages our students and faculty and has meaning and impact in the world. In so doing, URI has become an increasingly self-sufficient and selective institution committed to both student access and success, and constant and strategic improvement in all that we do.

Context. About a decade ago, prior to the recession that began in 2008, URI was struggling with multiple years of level or declining state funding and receiving about 14,000 applications for admission. Selectivity in admissions hovered around 85%, in-state tuition was too low, out-of-state tuition was too high, and our financial aid investment was insufficient to attract and retain students. At that time, only 45% to 50% of students were successfully completing 30 academic credits their first year and overall first-year student retention was slipping. In the 2008 freshman cohort, nearly one-third of our out-of-state students did not return for their sophomore year, which further exacerbated financial challenges. International students were rare on campus and research funding had been flat for a decade. URI was struggling, morale was low, and the challenges intensified when the state appropriation was reduced by $27 million between 2008 and 2010, including a $13 million reduction in 2009. The University’s financial reserves were approximately $12 million in deficit and the institution had limited financial flexibility. Paradoxically, this challenging time inspired the beginning of a new era of reinvigoration for the institution—one characterized by strategic planning and investment, self-discipline and self-sufficiency, innovation, and focused attention on the quality of the student experience. Indeed, these challenges triggered the transformation of the University of Rhode Island.

The Transformation of The University of Rhode Island

Academic Vision and Plans. In 2009, the University community forged a new vision:

The University of Rhode Island will be the institution of first choice for students and faculty with a passion for inquiry. Our emphasis on innovation and interdisciplinary learning and discovery connects us with the world and is built upon a contemporary foundation of liberal learning and scholarship that celebrates diversity and complexity, and instills empowerment and social responsibility. Our emphases and expertise in the broadly defined realms of health, environment, and science and technology translate into learning and discovery that matters deeply in the world. We contribute directly to global prosperity through collaborative innovation and productive partnerships.
This vision shaped the University’s new focus towards defining URI’s first comprehensive strategic Academic Strategic Plan, entitled *Charting Our Path to the Future*, and the President’s Transformational Goals for the 21st Century. This new Academic Strategic Plan was laser focused on six overarching goals that served as guideposts for all University investments and strategic initiatives from 2010 through 2015. Major foci for both effort and investment related directly to enhancing academic quality and value, and preparing students for an ever-changing world. Overarching themes stimulated interdisciplinary learning and discovery, the reinvigoration of general education, enrollment management, expanded opportunities in our Honors Program, and advancing research and innovation. To ensure an effective interconnection between the Academic Strategic Plan priorities and budget, the University formed the Strategic Budget and Planning Council (SBPC), a 20-member body chaired by the Provost, which comprises vice presidents and representatives of deans, faculty, staff, and students. In efforts to further leverage cross-divisional collaboration and planning, the Council’s Vice Chair is the Vice President for Administration and Finance. The SBPC reviews all new funding proposals, including capital improvement investments, in relation to the goals of the Academic Strategic Plan and potential institutional benefits derived from the proposed new investments. The SBPC recommends only the most compelling and impactful funding proposals to the President for institutional investment. Further, the administration and the Faculty Senate collectively formed the Joint Committee on Academic Planning (JCAP), which is the responsible entity for developing, updating, and measuring progress toward academic plan goals and organizing our annual Academic Summit, which typically engage as many as 250 faculty, as well as other community members, each year.

In January 2016, following a year of effort on the part of faculty, administrators and students, URI promulgated its second Academic Strategic Plan, *Innovation with Impact - 2016 – 2021*. This Plan builds on the progress of the first plan and focuses on the following goals: enhancing student success; expanding research, scholarship, and creative work; growing a global presence; embracing diversity and social justice; streamlining processes to improve effectiveness; and implementing a bold advancement agenda. The overarching focus of this plan is the aggressive pursuit of strategic excellence in all areas of academics and institutional investment. The plan is steeped in innovation and focuses on creating new integrative approaches to learning, discovery, and outreach and developing meaningful partnerships both on- and off-campus.

With leadership from the newly formed Information Technology (IT) Governance Committee (ITgov) and the entire university community, URI distributed its first IT Strategic Plan in February 2017. This forward-looking plan acknowledges the critical role of technology for all constituencies and functions of the University, and the rapidity of change in technology and its applications. Importantly, the IT plan is intimately linked to the goals of the Academic Strategic Plan (see page 19 of the IT Plan), reinforcing the strategic and synergistic impact of each institutional investment. This plan serves as a guide for our IT investments moving forward.

In addressing the pervasive challenges of a decade ago, the University established a strong foundation in strategic planning that has guided every investment, creating crucial financial efficiencies that have boldly advanced the institution. Most importantly, these Plans have provided an investment framework that has guided resource allocation and ensured financial stability of the university. Indeed, the university budget has become a visible manifestation of institutional priorities and our strategic plans, and reserve funds are now at approximately $30 million. At the same time, the work of SBPC, JCAP, and ITgov has re-enforced a system of shared governance that has served the institution’s best interests and is likely to continue to enable and empower URI in the future.

*Enrollment Management and Financial Aid.* Recognizing that URI is a tuition-dependent institution, serious attention to strategic enrollment management has been a critical element of URI’s resurgence, financial stability, self-sufficiency, and reestablishment as Rhode Island’s selective flagship institution. In
2009, we added a Vice Provost for Enrollment Management position and established an enrollment management strategy team and plan. Despite the demographic decline in high school graduates in Rhode Island, New England, the Northeast broadly, and much of the nation, URI has witnessed substantial growth in the number, quality, and diversity of its applicant pool. A decade ago URI received about 14,000 applications for approximately 3,100 freshman slots. In each of the last four years, URI has broken its record for most applications received and for the fall 2017 class we received 22,656 applications, a 60% increase from 2007. With the much larger pool, selectivity increased from an acceptance rate of 85% a decade ago to 69% for the entering class in fall 2017. Yield of high quality applicants has also increased. In the past few years about one-third or more of our entering freshman class has been eligible for our Honors Program and the academic profile of our fall 2017 freshman class is impressive—with an average high school GPA of 3.54 and SAT score of 1180. A decade ago this profile was 3.1 and 1075, respectively. The diversity profile of our student body has increased by one percent per year over the past decade with 22% of the 2017 entering freshman class and 20% of all students coming from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups. Diversity in the student body has grown by 65% since 2008 and enrollment has been the highest in the University’s 125-year history for three of the past four years.

While our enrollment successes can be attributed in part to new and effective recruitment strategies, a key component has been the development and implementation of strategic financial aid allocation models tied to enrollment goals established via the Academic Strategic Plans. Financial aid has emerged as our most important enrollment management tool in addition to its critical role in providing support for needy and meritorious students. A strategic financial aid allocation model has enabled the institution to enhance student quality, increase ethnic diversity, ensure access and affordability for needy students, and generate net revenue necessary to operate the institution.

**Student Success Initiatives.** As a result of focused and strategic efforts aimed at “student success” in both the former and current Academic Strategic Plan, URI has made steady progress in advancing overall student retention and graduation rates. The Academic Strategic Plan metrics indicate that the 2016 first-year retention rate is 84.3%, the highest in the University’s history. This figure represents an increase of 1.9% from the previous year and a six percent increase from the Academic Strategic Plan 2010 baseline. After decades of flat graduation rates (a six-year rate of 54% to 57%), URI has seen a steady increase in graduation rates of first-year, full-time students over the past eight years. The six-year graduation rate (2011 cohort) is greater than 65.5%, an increase of 2.8% from the prior year and 6.8% over 2008. The four-year graduation rate for the 2013 cohort is 52%, an increase of 13.5% from the baseline year (2008) of the 2010-15 Academic Plan and the highest in URI history. URI’s undergraduate average time to degree (excluding double majors and dual degrees) averaged 4.2 years over the past two years, which compares favorably with peer institutions in the region (as reported by Complete College America).

The University’s critically important “student credit completion” (the proportion of first-year students completing 30 credits, sophomores completing 60 credits, etc.) initiatives, when compared to a decade ago, have resulted in a 29% increase in first-year students and a 24% increase in sophomores on track for timely graduation. Seventy-four percent of the 2016 first-year cohort earned 30 or more credits their first year and 70% of the 2015 sophomore cohort earned 60 or more credits after their second year, as compared to 45% and 46%, respectively, a decade ago. Our continued strategic focus on student credit completion along with our growing Winter J-Term enrollment and enhancement of summer offerings will continue to positively impact student learning and graduation rates in the future.

Although there remains much room for improvement, substantive gains in success measures thus far are attributed to our strategic financial aid investments and a focused institutional effort in our “Take 15 to Finish” campaign, designed to encourage and support students completing 15 credits per semester and
graduating on time. This effort has included developing curricular advising plans/maps to guide student progress, hiring professional advisors in University College for Academic Success, altering the class drop policy to encourage student course completion, and dramatically expanding experiential learning opportunities for our students. For AY2016-17, more than 8,100 URI students earned academic credit through experiential learning, such as internships, undergraduate research, clinical experiences, and more, as compared to about 4,000 students a few years earlier. This figure does not include paid internships that do not offer academic credit in some majors, such as Engineering, where 85% of students do at least one paid non-credit internship. The Winter J-term, launched in January 2014, provides opportunities for students to earn additional credits at a reduced cost and “catch up” during the 3-week January term. During January 2017, nearly 1,000 students returned to college and completing their degrees over the past three years. A new and reinvigorated undergraduate research initiative, entitled University of Rhode Island Undergraduate Research and Innovation (URI)², expands opportunities and funding for students wishing to work with faculty on research and creative scholarship across all disciplines or innovation projects, such as product development, hackathons, etc.

**Strategic Investment in Faculty.** Despite substantial fiscal challenges from FY 2007 to FY2010, URI continued to strategically invest in new faculty. Since 2010, we have hired approximately 302 new full-time faculty, which has triggered the renewal of the intellectual foundation of the institution. Faculty positions were defined via strategic reinvestment of vacated positions, new cluster hires in areas of strategic importance (e.g., neuroscience, Islamic Studies, water resources, “big data,” health across the lifespan, and renewable energy), and a significant investment of 60 new full-time faculty positions. The new positions, supported by revenue gains from retention increases, are allocated strategically to meet student demand, support relevant new academic programs, and to strategically enhance research, scholarship, and the creative work of the faculty. A new Multicultural Faculty Fellows program has enhanced the diversity of the faculty. During AY2015-16, we created a promotional path for lecturers, who can seek promotion to Senior Lecturer and Teaching Professor. These advancement opportunities for lecturers provide financial recognition and stability as reward for teaching excellence, but also reinforce the critical role of teaching faculty in both student learning and empowering research and scholarship across the University.

In 2014, URI established the Office for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (ATL), a faculty development enterprise focused on advancing pedagogy, online learning, and learning outcomes assessment. ATL also manages the University’s new academic testing center. ATL offers numerous workshops to support faculty teaching and also an Online Faculty Fellows Program to encourage and demonstrate best practices in online teaching. The assessment office supports departments and programs in developing best practices in learning outcomes assessment and has been instrumental in implementing assessment of our new general education program. During AY2016-17, there were 844 faculty participants in ATL workshops and programs. With guidance and support from ATL, URI’s online enrollment of 9,000 students in AY2016-17 represents 50% growth since AY2012-13 and 19% growth over the previous year. This active participation reflects the extraordinary commitment of URI faculty to enhancing student learning and success and also speaks to the effectiveness of ATL faculty development programming.

During the AY2016-17, we initiated a new Writing Across URI program, led by a distinguished faculty member in our writing program. Recognizing student challenges in writing, Writing Across URI is committed to creating a culture of writing at the University, by helping faculty with their own academic and professional writing and also by asking more of students as writers. The program offers faculty opportunities to participate
in seminars, workshops, writing retreats, or other events—to improve their own writing and to develop the writing skills of our students in all disciplines.

Finally, URI has reinvented and reinvigorated its general education program. This was a lengthy and at times contentious process, but resulted in a contemporary 21st century general education program built around 12 learning outcomes. All courses included in the new program are newly developed and meet a set of learning outcomes that our faculty believe are critical to student learning and success. This program, adapted from the Liberal Education America's Promise (LEAP) model of AAC&U, was implemented in fall 2016 and is led by a new faculty Director of the Office of Innovation in General Education. We believe that this revitalized and transfer student-friendly program will add value to the student learning experience and better engage students in developing knowledge, skills, and values necessary to support their aspirations and quality of life.

**Academic Reorganization.** The University has recently reorganized academic programs related to “health” and “healthcare” and has created the URI Academic Health Collaborative (AHC). The AHC formally bridges the College of Pharmacy, College of Nursing, and the newly created College of Health Sciences. Collectively, the AHC comprises approximately 175 faculty and more than 5,000 students. Seven of the University’s largest majors are in the AHC. The AHC fosters cross-cutting innovation in broad aspects of health education, research, and community engagement with a focus on inter-professional education, population health, health promotion, and recognition and elimination of health disparities. The operational and entrepreneurial entity of the AHC is the recently established Institute for Integrated Health and Innovation (IHII) focused on interdisciplinary academic programs, health services and analytics research, and outreach programs that address the needs of communities, health promotion, and promoting productive partnerships. IHII has entered into a formal and productive partnership with the RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services. In addition, the University has merged the School of Education and the former College of Continuing Education to create the new Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies. This new College builds a bridge between teacher preparation programs and adult education aimed at non-traditional students and has already seen a spike in enrollment in its first year. This college also includes a new Office of Strategic Initiatives, which serves as an entrepreneurial education outreach arm for the college and University aimed at providing educational resources to corporations, nonprofit organizations, and teachers. As part of the reorganization, the former Colleges of Human Sciences and Services and Continuing Education were eliminated.

**Internationalization of the University.** Historically, URI had a minimal international presence. For example, in 2005 there were only 169 international students at URI, 32 undergraduates and 137 graduate students. As part of the 2010 to 2015 Academic Strategic Plan, the University began efforts to strengthen global education and expand international programs and opportunities. In 2015, there were 567 international students at URI, 281 undergraduates and 286 graduates. Our plans are to continue to grow international enrollment, expand efforts to create international partnerships, and ensure that our domestic students gain international experience and cultural competency. Multiple strategies have advanced the internationalization of the University. Our new general education program has established a global competency learning outcome. In 2010, we established a Distinguished Visiting International Scholars Program, which brings four distinguished scholars to the University each year from all parts of the world and many disciplines for an extended visit, including presentations to students, faculty, and the public. Through this effort, 26 distinguished international scholars have been brought to URI, which have triggered many extended relationships as well as expanding the institution's reputation globally. In addition, our new Winter J-Term program includes 15 to 20 international travel courses each year led by URI faculty. As a result of Winter J-
Term travel courses, expanded study abroad opportunities, and exchanges and other global programs, 850 URI students participated in a global education experience abroad last year, a 200% increase from about a decade ago. We have recently entered into a partnership with Cambridge Education Group to establish an international pathway program named ONCAMPUS RHODE ISLAND.

Faculty have increasingly developed robust research and education partnerships with colleagues, institutions, and governments all over the world. In particular, ongoing partnerships with academic institutions and/or governments in Indonesia and Ghana have been especially productive along with partnerships in Cuba, China, Germany, and, until recently, Brazil. Our renowned International Engineering and International Business Programs are five-year programs (including a year abroad) leading to BS degrees in an engineering or business discipline and BA degrees in a foreign language. In 2012, URI was designated a Chinese Language Flagship Program (one of nine in the country) and recognized for providing “superior” Chinese language capabilities for our students. We have made substantial progress in growing our international presence, but recognize there is much left to do, including augmenting our international leadership and support team.

**Campus Infrastructure.** While the state appropriation to the University continues to be constrained (the FY2017 appropriation of $75 million is below the FY2007 level of $83 million), the citizens of Rhode Island have made substantial investments in the University’s infrastructure. Over the past decade, we have made approximately half a billion dollars of state-supported strategic capital improvements to the campus, including the new Center for Biotechnology and Life Sciences, the Avedisian Pharmacy Building, the Beaupre Center for Chemical and Forensic Sciences, the Nursing Education Center (in Providence), the Ocean Science and Exploration Center (on the Bay campus), Hillside Residence Hall, and the new $150 million Engineering complex under construction today. We will soon break ground on a new Welcome Center in support of our admissions and visitor programs funded entirely from University reserve funds. In fall 2017, we will begin construction of another 500+ bed suite-style residence hall (Brookside Apartments). Recent major completed renovations include the historic Lippitt Hall, which now houses the University Honors Program, and the transformation of the University Library into the Carothers Library and Learning Commons. The Learning Commons includes new student learning and presentation spaces, an active learning classroom, Maker Space, and the transformation of the Library to include space dedicated to our Big Data Collaborative and URI DataSpark, a new University entity engaged in data analytics for state agencies and other partner organizations. Student use of the Library and Learning Commons is at an all-time high. In 2010, the University invested $1.2 million of carry forward funds to install state-of-the-art technology in 67 general assignment classrooms that previously contained no technology at all and subsequently established an annual budget of approximately $600,000 to assist in maintaining and continuously improving classroom technology and furnishings. Classrooms within new and existing buildings now allow for the most advanced teaching technology available. The University’s infrastructure has indeed come a long way in a brief time and the campus is now a wonderful asset that helps attract both students and faculty. Despite these improvements, however, our deferred maintenance remains significant (at approximately $300M) and we have a desperate need for major renovations to our Fine Arts building and the Narragansett Bay campus. We have received one million dollars in capital planning funds from the state in FY2018 to plan for the renovation and creation of new spaces in the Fine Arts building and we have completed a Master Plan for the renewal of the Narragansett Bay campus.

**Research and Economic Development.** The recent decade of institutional transformation has been accompanied by significant growth in our research programs and impacts. For the FY2009 to FY2017 period, our annual research expenditures averaged approximately $82 million (ranging from $68.7 to $100.2 million),
which represents 52% growth over the average of $53.9 million (ranging from $41.4 to $61.1 million) the previous decade. This growth in research includes a year or two of federal stimulus funding, but also reflects research funding success during the recent highly constrained federal research funding sequestration years. Importantly, the growth in research has occurred at a time of maximum growth in enrollment and many teaching/learning innovations across the university. The parallel growth of our research and educational enterprises over the past several years highlights the interconnection and interdependence of our learning and discovery missions and is a tribute to the extraordinary efforts and commitment of the URI faculty.

The growth in the research enterprise reflects the emergence of a new era of increasingly interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches to research, scholarship, and creative work at URI. The new George and Anne Ryan Institute for Neuroscience, for example, formally initiated in 2013 with a $15 million gift from Tom and Cathy Ryan, includes faculty affiliates from five colleges and numerous departments. The Institute is a multidisciplinary research center focused on discovering and developing disease-modifying therapies for neurodegenerative disorders and is in the process of adding four new highly accomplished faculty representing different disciplines. A recent prestigious Next Generation Humanities grant to URI from the National Endowment for the Humanities, entitled Humanities at Large, has advanced interdisciplinary and experiential learning for humanities doctoral students in five key areas: coastal environments, health/medicine, publishing/editing, digital humanities/big data, and cultural organizations. This initiative bridges faculty interests and expertise from across the campus, including the Center for the Humanities, the Coastal Institute and the Big Data Collaborative. Similarly, a new Social Science Institute for Research, Education, and Policy (SSIREP) is a campus-wide consortium comprising 60 scholars with interests and expertise in social sciences and public policy. In 2016, URI established a new Institute for Integrated Health and Innovation, an interdisciplinary research, education, and outreach center focused on population health, health services, and healthcare improvements. The Institute explores creative health reform strategies and fosters research, partnerships, and community engagement. The Institute is building strong partnerships across the Academic Health Collaborative, with regional health care providers, and the RI Executive Office of Health and Human Services. In particular, the Institute is emerging as a major player in the state in regard to health system and workforce transformation, especially in relation to state Medicaid programs and analytical needs.

The University takes seriously its role as a stimulator of economic growth and opportunity in the state and region. A 2012 economic impact study revealed that URI generated $726.4 million in statewide economic output that year. To expand that impact, URI established the Business Engagement Center (BEC) in 2013 to provide Rhode Island businesses with one-stop shopping to access the University’s vast resources. Companies use the services to sponsor research, access assistance with technology or intellectual property transfer, receive customized workforce training, and connect with undergraduate and graduate students for internships, and much more. Hundreds of new University-corporate partnerships have been forged since the establishment of the BEC. Our research magazine, Momentum: Research and Innovation, highlights the broad array of research, scholarship, and creative work of our faculty and illustrates the transformation of the URI scholarly enterprise in recent years.

Where to From Here?

This institutional self-study triggered by the NEASC comprehensive evaluation has stimulated a moment of pause and reflection by many in the University community who have been engaged in leading and participating in the institutional change agenda. This reflection has helped us understand and appreciate the efforts expended and the return on the investments to date, but also the transformation that has taken place at our University in a short period of time. Reflection can be important, even necessary, not only to
understand from whence you came, but to also motivate and direct continued productive efforts in the future. Indeed, URI is a vastly different institution than a decade ago. We believe it has become a much better institution—and one committed to sustaining a path of continuous improvement and excellence for our students, staff, and faculty, and also for alumni, friends, and partners who are engaged with and proud of the institution.

While we have made measurable progress, there is much more to be done for URI to meet its full potential. In that regard, there is considerable new work underway. For instance:

- We must better address the challenge of student performance in critical gateway classes where students struggle with learning and successful course completion. We have made some progress, but we need to thoughtfully invest resources and test new strategies in this area. The payback will have an enormous impact on student success.
- We are just beginning a University-wide Campus Master Planning update and a new process streamlining initiative aimed at reducing our internal bureaucracy and improving services to make the university more agile, efficient, and user-friendly for our community.
- We are undertaking a dramatic reallocation of graduate teaching assistantships and planning a strategic new investment aimed at expanding that critical resource and growing our graduate programs.
- We are working closely with state government to create a URI-affiliated Innovation Campus in partnership with industry partners.
- As outlined in goal 6 of our Academic Strategic Plan, we will be launching a major new fundraising campaign this year with a goal of raising $250 million; the Campaign for URI will be the most ambitious in our history, will further elevate the stature of the University, and help us establish a strong and sustainable financial and marketplace position.

We welcome this institutional review, especially at this time in the evolution of our University, and look forward to learning from the observations and insights of the visiting team and Commission members. Today, we stand proud of our University, and, in particular, in the collective accomplishments that have reshaped, refocused, and reinvigorated the University of Rhode Island. Thank you in advance for your time and effort.