February 20, 2018

Dr. Barbara E. Brittingham, President
New England Association of Schools and Colleges
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
3 Burlington Woods Drive, Suite 100
Burlington, MA 01803-4514

Dear President Brittingham:

Please consider this letter the University of Rhode Island’s (URI) formal response to the report of the evaluation team, which visited URI in October of 2017 as part of our decennial comprehensive review and application for reaccreditation.

We thank the members of the visiting team for their diligence and insight. We appreciate the sacrifice made by team members, who took the time to travel to Rhode Island for several long days of extremely hard work. Although we value the efforts of all team members, we are particularly grateful to the team’s chair, President Susan J. Hunter of the University of Maine. During her two trips to URI, President Hunter displayed a strong commitment to the quality of the process and a true sense of interinstitutional collegiality. We will honor the hard work of the team by giving thorough consideration to all of its observations and recommendations.

We are pleased that the report is very positive and that the team found a “vibrant and engaged community with very attractive facilities (p. 1)” during its visit. The team clearly recognized the progress that the University has made since its last comprehensive evaluation in 2007. To give just few examples (see, also, pp. 39-40 of the report and pp. xxii-xxix of the Institutional Self-Study): two five-year academic strategic plans have been adopted to guide the University’s work; strategic budget and planning processes have been developed and refined; internal governance procedures have been streamlined; new colleges and programs have been created and the general education curriculum completely revised; admissions have grown and the quality and diversity of entering students have increased; completion rates have improved; over 40% of the full-time faculty has been hired since 2010; an information technology strategic plan has been adopted; $71 million in capital investments have been made annually; new systems for the assessment of both academic programs and learning outcomes have been developed; and public disclosure has improved through a branding initiative and improvements in the University’s website. The team also recognized that these improvements have come during one of the more difficult decades in Rhode Island’s economic history and at a time when regional demographic trends have been unfavorable.
While acknowledging this progress, the team also highlighted several concerns in its report. Below, we address all of the concerns that were specifically listed at the end of the report (p. 40) as well as a few items that appeared in its body but were not highlighted as areas of special concern.

**Highlighted concerns**

1. “The University’s strong focus on access currently is not highlighted as part of its revised mission statement.”

   We agree with the team’s finding that URI has a strong focus on access. This focus is evidenced by our commitment to the strategic use of financial aid as well as to the support of special programs designed to make a university education available to all who are qualified. Founded in 1968, our Talent Development Program, for example, helps students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds succeed at URI.

   As we mentioned in our Institutional Self-Study (p. 4), we plan on revisiting our mission statement prior to the adoption of the next (i.e. 2022-2027) academic strategic plan. We will consider the inclusion of a statement on access at that time.

2. “Even given the openness of the University’s planning and budgeting processes, further efforts to enhance communication of these processes and their outcomes to all constituencies are still needed.”

   There are likely few universities in the United States with more mechanisms for shared governance than URI. The rights of the Faculty Senate are codified in state law; the Graduate Council and Student Senate are vibrant and independent bodies; and several joint and presidential committees—with faculty, staff, and student representation—fulfill important roles in decision-making. Further, the rights and interests and nearly all employees are negotiated, ratified, and contained in a number of collective bargaining agreements.

   Despite these mechanisms for shared governance, it may be that some decisions are not well communicated to stakeholders. This is a problem found at many large and complex organizations. We continue to enhance communications through continuous improvement of organizational documents and websites. We are also considering some changes in organizational structure that balance centralization and decentralization so that decisions and processes are properly coordinated throughout the organization and reflect the needs of the University and its many units.

3. “Unit level planning is yet to be coordinated and made more transparent.”

   The University has made great progress in planning during the past decade. The main planning document is the Academic Strategic Plan (see *Innovation with Impact: Shaping
the Future of URI, 2016-2021). All other planning efforts at URI are expected to align with the Academic Strategic Plan. Other planning documents include the recently adopted Information Technology Strategic Plan and the Campus Master Plan. In addition, nearly every college and several other units have strategic plans that align with the Academic Strategic Plan. The new Colleges (e.g., College of Health Sciences and the Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies) are actively engaged in developing their strategic plans. Further, the Strategic Budget and Planning Council assures that new funding allocations fulfill the purposes of the academic strategic plan, and the Joint Committee on Academic Planning monitors the creation of new academic programs for alignment with the plan.

During the past year, the University has hired three new vice presidents (for Administration and Finance, Student Affairs, and Research and Economic Development) as well as several new deans, two of whom head the new colleges mentioned above. A priority of these new leaders is addressing gaps in strategic planning within their units.

4. "The organizational structure of operations such as HR, Procurement and Travel is unnecessarily bureaucratic. The processes for searches and procurement now require multiple levels of review and could perhaps be streamlined."

As a state institution, some of our bureaucratic challenges are externally imposed. For example, most staff positions are subject to State of Rhode Island personnel rules and procurement to oversight by the Rhode Island Division of Purchases. However, we also have too many internal bureaucratic procedures that can impede our work and progress. The most recent Academic Strategic Plan addresses this problem directly and includes a clear mandate for process streamlining. As such, URI is aggressively addressing bureaucratic barriers to efficiency. In particular, the position description for the Vice President for Administration and Finance was revised prior to the recent search to include a major focus on process re-engineering and streamlining. As an initial step, the current Vice President for Administration and Finance, who joined URI in 2017, recently received independence for purchases of less than one million dollars. This does not mean that URI is no longer subject to state rules, but rather that it may handle many more purchases through its own procurement office without approval from the state’s central office. In addition, the same Vice President is also leading a cross-divisional team that is streamlining the University’s hiring process so that less time is spent and fewer resources are wasted in filling positions. Finally, the Interim Vice President for Research and Economic Development formed a Grants Management Streamlining Task Force charged to streamline the grants management processes from pre-award to project closeout. Significant progress is being realized in each of these areas. The constant challenge is to overcome the inertia to continue to do business the same old way.

5. "Student access to high quality advising is not consistent and seems to vary based on class standing and major."
An ad hoc committee on advising was formed in 2011 and delivered a report to the Faculty Senate the following year. The work of the ad hoc committee was continued by a standing Faculty Senate Undergraduate Academic Advising Committee. One outcome of the work of these committees was the recent hiring of 11 professional advisors, who work through University College for Academic Success (UCAS) and are assigned to first- and second-year students in each degree-granting college. We now have 16 professional advisors in UCAS. We expect that the work of these professional advisors will improve the overall advising system at URI. These advisors provide “on demand” walk-in advising services to students. These advisors will not only enhance freshman and sophomore advising but will free up faculty resources that can be concentrated on upper-level advising. We hope, as well, that these professional advisers will share their expertise with the entire community for the benefit of all advising activity.

The University participates in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). We will pay close attention to next year’s NSSE results to see if they indicate increased student satisfaction with advising.

6. “A definitive funding plan to address the initiatives in the IT Strategic Plan, which could be up to $15 million, is yet to be developed.”

The figure of $15 million is a somewhat arbitrary approximation reported by the visiting team, not a formal estimate of the University. Nonetheless, the University recognizes the challenges in funding its IT strategic plan and has already taken steps to do so. Last year, the Strategic Budget and Planning Council approved the allocation of $500,000 for a project on “single sign-on” that is part of the IT strategic plan and an important step in streamlining processes. Recently, a group comprising representatives of ITS, the Provost’s Office, and the Controller’s Office met to begin planning a better system for paying for network services. In addition, a recent meeting of ITS, the Provost’s Office, and the Budget and Financial Planning Office was held to discuss overall challenges in the ITS budget, such as the periodic (and often substantial) increases in software license fees. A component of the funding plan to support the implementation of the IT Strategic Plan is expected to include a modest $44 increase to the student Technology Fee, which is already considerably lower than that of our peer institutions. This fee increase would generate approximately $700,000 annually for IT strategic investments. Unfortunately, the Council on Postsecondary Education did not approve the requested fee increase for FY19 because of its desire to once again hold tuition and fees constant.

The University recently hired a new interim chief information officer and has begun a search (with the help of an executive search firm) for a new permanent (i.e. on three-year, renewable contracts) CIO. It will be a priority of both the interim and new CIO to work with the University to explore external funding and fundraising opportunities to finance the IT strategic plan.
7. "There is no single statement of institution-level expectations for student learning, rather a variety of statements that provide differing versions of these goals."

Recently, URI completely changed its general education program. The former program required students to choose from a menu of courses based on discipline (e.g. languages, letters, natural sciences, social sciences). The new program requires students to take 40 credits of courses that have been deemed to fulfill one or more learning outcomes from approved list of learning outcomes. These learning outcomes were adapted from the LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes developed by the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U). It is our intention that general education learning outcomes are an expression of institutional-level expectations. The learning outcomes are:

**A-Build knowledge** of diverse peoples and cultures and of the natural and physical world through the following four outcomes: A1 – Understand and apply theories and methods of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematical (STEM) disciplines. A2 – Understand theories and methods of the social and behavioral sciences. A3 – Understand the context and significance of the humanities using theoretical, historical, and experiential perspectives. A4 – Understand the context and significance of arts and design using aesthetic and technical perspectives on form, creativity, and performance.

**B-Develop intellectual and interdisciplinary competencies** for academic and lifelong learning through the following four outcomes: B1 – Write effective and precise texts that fulfill their communicative purposes and address various audiences. B2 – Communicate effectively via understanding audiences, listening, delivering oral presentations, and actively participating in teams or group work. B3 – Apply the appropriate mathematical, statistical, or computational strategies to problem solving. B4 Develop information literacy to independently research complex issues.

**C-Exercise individual and social responsibilities** through the following three outcomes: C1 – Develop and engage in civic knowledge and responsibilities. C2 – Develop and exercise global responsibilities. C3 – Develop and exercise responsibilities relating to diversity and inclusion responsibilities.

**D-Integrate and apply** these abilities and capacities, adapting them to new settings, questions, and responsibilities to lay the foundation for lifelong learning: D1 Demonstrate the ability to synthesize multiple knowledge perspectives, competencies and responsibilities.

The visiting team noted that the on-line catalog contains a different list of learning outcomes:

The University of Rhode Island expects that every academic program, as a consequence of the interaction between general education and a major, will lead the student to: think critically in order to solve problems and question the nature
and sources of authority; use the methods and materials characteristic of each of the knowledge areas while understanding their interconnectedness; commit to intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning; maintain an openness to new ideas while utilizing the social skills necessary for both teamwork and leadership; and think independently, be self-directed, and take initiative based on informed choices.

It also noted that certain language in the Academic Strategic Plan, the President’s Transformational Goals for the 21st Century, and URI Cornerstones could be interpreted as learning outcomes. In addition, each program has program-specific learning outcomes.

We recognize the confusion that these several statements may cause and will consider revising official documents, particularly the University Manual and URI Undergraduate & Graduate Catalog, so that the definitive set of institution-wide learning outcomes are publicly presented and clear to all.

8. “Using the results of Student Learning Assessment activities to inform the University’s planning and resource allocation is a connection yet to be made.”

We appreciate the visiting team’s recognition of URI’s progress on student learning outcomes’ assessment. Since the last comprehensive evaluation, the University has established the Office of Student Learning, Outcomes Assessment, and Accreditation (SLOAA). SLOAA has worked closely with both the Learning Outcomes Oversight Committee (LOOC) and the Subcommittee for the Assessment of General Education (SAGE). Every program at URI has a set of published student learning outcomes and departments and programs regularly report progress on measuring the achievement of outcomes. Individual programs certainly use the information from student learning outcomes’ measurement to revise academic programs and curricula.

More broadly, evidence from student learning outcomes’ assessment has been considered as the University has adopted several initiatives, such as Writing Across URI, Gateway to Completion (G2C), Winter J-Term, and the recently created Office of URI Undergraduate Research and Innovation (URI)². In each case, programs were created to address a specific (in the case of Writing Across URI) or general (in the cases of G2C and Winter J-Term) issue raised by considering the level of success in achieving student learning outcomes. Admittedly, in some cases, the connection may have been more anecdotal than analytical, but did, nonetheless, underlie the allocation of resources. We recognize, however, that the connection between the assessment of student learning outcomes and resource allocation could be strengthened and made more systematic.

Other concerns

Throughout its report, the team noted a number of minor concerns. We thank the team for bringing these to our attention and fully plan on investigating and taking appropriate action on
these issues. Since we agree with many of these concerns, we have no formal response to most of them. We do, however, wish to clarify and/or update information on a few issues raised.

The team noted (p. 9) that it is important that the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) and Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) recognize the unique position of URI as the state’s lone public, research university. This is particularly important in any discussions of the higher education “system” in Rhode Island. We agree with this point and note that the University is currently working with AGB Institutional Strategies (AGBIS), which is under contract with OPC, to suggest improvements in the operation of the state’s three institutions of higher education. We share the concern of the visiting team with many of the other issues involving external governance and potential conflicts between the governing bodies and the executive branch of state government. While these issues may be beyond the University’s ability to influence directly, we are attempting to raise these issues and remain hopeful that the AGBIS consultants can be helpful to us in surfacing and resolving these issues with the Commissioner and Council. We fully recognize that both the Commissioner and CPE are well-intentioned and in the process of learning their respective roles. In the end, this issue must be addressed either by the governing bodies themselves and/or by elected officials.

On pages 22 and 23 of the report, the team noted that “the absence of a faculty tab on the university homepage makes accessing information about development opportunities challenging.” This comment may have escaped our notice when we had the opportunity to correct factual errors in the report, but at the bottom of the URI homepage there is a tab entitled “For Faculty.” Clicking on this tab takes faculty to resources concerning teaching, advising, technology, research, and several other topics. We will, however, compare this website with those of peer institutions to see if improvements can be made. Finally, the university will be rolling out an upgrade to the institutional web presence during summer 2018 and the new homepage will include a faculty tab.

Similarly, the team noted a few deficiencies with public disclosure (e.g. information on student indebtedness and student post-graduation employment) (p. 37). While our small Institutional Research Office maintains a website that includes a good deal of important data and information, we recognize that there is room for improvement. In the not-too-distant future, we hope to have an Institutional Research website that includes dashboards, reports, and user-friendly databases that improve both public disclosure and the ability of units at the university to engage in analysis and self-reflection.

Also concerning disclosure, the team noted a lack of published promotion and tenure standards (p. 21). While promotion and tenure procedures are included in the full-time faculty collective bargaining agreement, and departments are required to update their internal procedures annually, actual written standards and expectations have been adopted by only a few colleges and departments. This is an area that deserves further attention, although it is also one that is difficult to address. For the most part, faculty are evaluated based on individual expectations that are made known at the time of appointment. Because it is completely possible that no two faculty in the same unit have the same expectations (n.b: departments with fewer than ten
tenure-track faculty are common at URI), it is difficult to develop broad expectations even at the department level.

Finally, and also concerning faculty, we are happy to report that a new collective bargaining agreement has been reached with part-time faculty union. The long impasse noted by the visiting team (p. 20) is now over and we look forward to a constructive relationship with the PTFU.

We thank you for considering this response and look forward to our meeting with the Commission on February 28.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
David M. Dooley, Ph.D.
President