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**The University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees  
University Advancement and External Affairs Meeting  
Wednesday, December 16, 2020, 1:00 p.m.**

**PURSUANT TO GOVERNOR RAIMONDO'S  
EXECUTIVE ORDER, THIS MEETING WAS HELD VIRTUALLY  
USING THE WEBEX PLATFORM (BOARD ONLY) AND FACEBOOK  
LIVESTREAM (PUBLIC VIEWING)**

**MINUTES**

Chair Christine Heenan acknowledged that a quorum was present and called the meeting to order at 1:00 p.m.

Attendees present for this virtual meeting:

**The URI Board of Trustees voting members:**

- Ms. Christine M. Heenan, Chair
- Dr. Karina Montilla Edmonds
- Ms. Cortney Nicolato
- Mr. Armand E. Sabitoni, Vice Chair
- Ms. Margo Cook (Board of Trustees Chair)

**The University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees ex officio member:**

- Ms. Barbara Cottam, Chair, Board of Education

**The University of Rhode Island staff members:**

- Linda Acciaro, Director, Communications and Marketing
- Mary Grace Almandrez, Associate Vice President & Chief Diversity Officer
- Thorr Bjorn, Director, Athletics
- Robin Cawley, Executive Assistant II, URI Board of Trustees
- Heather Colby, Assistant Director, Brand Marketing and Advertising, Communications and Marketing
- Kathy M. Collins, Vice President, Student Affairs
- David M. Dooley, URI President
- Michelle Curreri, Chief of Staff, and University Liaison
- Austen Farrell, Chief Marketing Officer, URI Foundation & Alumni Engagement (URIFAE)
- Peter Harrington, Assistant Legal Counsel

**The University of Rhode Island staff members (continued):**

- Lauren Jensen, Assistant Legal Counsel
- Kelly K. Mahoney, Executive Director for External Relations and Communications
- Lil Breul O'Rourke, President, URI Foundation & Alumni Engagement (URIFAE)
- Louis Saccoccio, General Counsel
- John Stringer, Director, Institutional Research, Institutional Research
- Phillip Teixeira, Lead Information Technologist, Office of the Provost
- Cheryl Trudel, Executive Assistant, External Relations and Communications

**Invited Guests:**

- Diane Chace Fannon '74, Board of Directors, Executive Committee, Vice Chair / Marketing and Communications Chair, URIFAE
- Gary Kullberg, '63, Marketing and Communications member, URIFAE
- Meaghan K. Wims, '02, Marketing and Communications member, URIFAE
- Cailin Travers, '13, Marketing and Communications member, URIFAE

**1. ACCEPTANCE OF THE AGENDA**

Chair Heenan called for a motion to accept the agenda for the December 16, 2020 meeting.

On a motion duly made by Ms. Nicolato and seconded by Vice Chair Sabitoni, it was

VOTED: THAT The University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees University Advancement and External Affairs Committee accept the December 16, 2020 meeting agenda.

VOTE: 4 members voted in the affirmative and 0 members voted in the negative.

YEAS: Ms. Christine M. Heenan, Dr. Karina Montilla Edmonds, Ms. Cortney Nicolato, and Mr. Armand E. Sabitoni.

NAYS: 0

ABSTAINS: 0

**2. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE OCTOBER 23, 2020 MEETING [Enclosure 2a](#)**

Chair Heenan called for a motion to approve the minutes for the October 23, 2020 meeting.

On a motion duly made by Dr. Karina Montilla Edwards and seconded by Ms. Nicolato, it was

VOTED: THAT The University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees University Advancement and External Affairs Committee approve the minutes of the October 23, 2020 meeting.

VOTE: 4 members voted in the affirmative and 0 members voted in the negative.

YEAS: Ms. Christine M. Heenan, Dr. Karina Montilla Edmonds, Ms. Cortney Nicolato, and Mr. Armand E. Sabitoni.

NAYS: 0

ABSTAINS: 0

### 3. DISCUSSION ITEMS

Chair Heenan welcomed Committee members and guests while stating that she was looking forward to the special dedicated Committee meeting, pointing out that Vice Chair for the Board of Directors, Executive Committee, and URIFAE Marketing and Communications Committee Chair, Ms. Diane Chace Fannon, was in attendance as well as other members of the URI Foundation & Alumni Engagement (URIFAE). Chair Heenan reminded the Committee that the discussion would start with revisiting the first of three presentations; for a more in-depth look and understanding of the University's national rankings (as was agreed upon at the Committee's last meeting), to best understand how the Committee might collectively increase the University's national and peer competitiveness rankings.

#### a. Overview of University's national rankings and peer competitiveness

John Stringer, Director of Institutional Research, gave a review of the presentation entitled, [University of Rhode Island Rankings - 2020-2021](#).

Chair Heenan asked Mr. Stringer if the designation of national universities is the Carnegie R1 or is it something different? Mr. Stringer stated that, "they use the Carnegie classifications, so, it is all doctoral granting universities according to the Carnegie National classifications" (*slide titled, US News*). At Chair Heenan's request, Mr. Stringer reviewed the top areas of weighted categories so that Committee members would have an opportunity to gain an appreciation of the role of expert opinion, of the financial resources rate, and of the six-year graduation rate (as disproportionately impactful on URI rankings). Mr. Stringer obliged, referencing the slide titled, "*Understanding URI's 2021 Ranking*" that he said would best illustrate Chair Heenan's observations.

Ms. Fannon asked Mr. Stringer to talk about "peer score," which will impact marketing discussions later. Mr. Stringer stated that the peer score is a survey that is distributed by US News to university presidents and provosts, where they are given a list that they use to rank the institutions on the list; and then that data are compiled by US News and end up in this peer score area. Mr. Stringer summed up this as the longest standing piece of the US News (that was the original US News ranking, and was the president's opinion survey); however, it has grown and expanded since then, into these other areas, but it is the most heavily weighted (at twenty (20) percent), for this single metric.

Ms. Cottam asked President Dooley, how many surveys does he receive, and if they are filled out, "or is it one for everybody that's on the list?" President Dooley responded saying that it is "one comprehensive survey that lists everybody in your category; national universities; and that it goes to a handful of people at each institution; presidents and provosts receive it; and someone at URI always fills it out." President

Dooley further explained that the survey is filled out via check boxes that get tallied, stating that the survey is “very unscientific; there's no criteria; it is just an opinion.”

From President Dooley’s response, Ms. Cottam inferred that, “it is just brand reputation or agenda.” President Dooley responded to Ms. Cottam saying that the survey is purely opinion; and it should be recognized that most people have no idea about the vast majority of institutions they are evaluating; that it is not required to have to check a box and thus, leaving a box unchecked (blank) might be a part of a problem for URI. Those lacking familiarity with the University, could lead to a lot of people that may not be weighing in at all.

Ms. Cook asked, “do we know what some of the practices are of some institutions that are scoring better here?” Additionally, she remarked that, “it's not really about scoring better; but is it more dollars spent in certain areas that create that awareness that we could look at— are there any institutions where there are good case studies to understand that?” Chair Heenan asked Ms. Cook to clarify if she was asking specifically “about the peer opinion ranking or about rankings overall?” Ms. Cook responded, “the peer score.”

President Dooley responded saying every year, around rankings time, URI receives tons of emails and publications from various universities touting their success and their quality as an attempt to influence the opinion survey metric of the US News and World Report. President Dooley further explained that the primary beneficiaries of the opinion survey are exactly the ones that would be expected, saying, “it's the Ivy League, it's Caltech, MIT, it's the University of California, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, the University of Texas— places that are ordinarily well known, very large, and have widespread international standing. They tend to do extremely well in these (opinion surveys), which is why they typically are near the top.”

Vice Chair Sabitoni asked if all of the categories are equally weighted? Mr. Stringer stated that they are not, and he provided an overview of the various weights (*referencing slide titled, “Methodology”*). Vice Chair Sabitoni thanked Mr. Stringer.

Ms. Cook stated that the real question is, “weighing the cost of what it would take to improve on any of these areas; and what the relevant benefit is? I would guess that even though they are weighted the way John described, any one area where you're very short is going to have an outsized impact on the overall ranking.” Chair Heenan responded to Ms. Cook saying that, “one point I would add to that, is an area where we have a relative disadvantage; we're not in an area so heavily concentrated with universities that there's simply a familiarity.” While giving an example, “Wheaton College, sitting in Boston is familiar to the sixty other Greater Boston presidents who are asked to fill this out, whereas URI, eighty-five miles down the road, is far less so. I think one of the things for us to think about, when we look at areas we target for our advertising for admissions, is how that maps to University concentration.”

President Dooley added that a lot of people still remember URI’s reputation as the number one party school. That is still a perception, and why public opinion of URI has lagged behind what URI has become over the last decade. President Dooley further stated that, “part of what we're thinking about, and have been thinking about over the last few years, is what our messaging communications and

marketing tools need to look like, what audiences should we be seeking out to more effectively change that lingering negative impression of the University. We're seeing movement there in the sense that, clearly, the dramatic increase in the numbers of applications to the institution over the last few years says, rather compellingly, that the reputation of the University has risen to some degree, at least over those last few years, because a lot more students are interested in coming here than at any previous time in our history, particularly non-residents.”

Chair Heenan stated that, “our connection to the world of therapeutics right now is where the entire world is; and I think there's a lot of opportunity in that and in the months and years ahead.”

Dr. Montilla Edmonds asked President Dooley if he gets a lot of flyers ahead of the rankings and questioned if URI [does that] as well? Ms. Mahoney noted that yes, URI does, and President Dooley stated, “that this it is relatively recent and that it really began with Kelly coming in and to an extent, when we rebranded and put out the ‘Think Big, We Do.’ (campaign). That effort paid real dividends; people have noticed that; it even made Jeopardy as an answer. I think that's had an impact. Frankly, the stories that we can share and the data that we can share have improved dramatically around things like graduation rate, retention rates, research publications, research funding, etc. Those have all been going up, but it's been really over the last several years, and we haven't had a chance to get the message out consistently, for a long period of time, at this point.”

Dr. Montilla Edmonds stated that she wanted to mention that “a really good example to look at is University of California Santa Barbara; twenty or thirty years ago, they had the biggest reputation of being a party school, and I've been super impressed by the way they've been able to really shift to an academically rigorous institution.” Chair Heenan stated she agreed that's a great example in response to Ms. Cook's earlier question; saying, “I think there's a lot to learn from UCSB— they hired a bunch of Nobel laureates.”

Mr. Stringer continued with the presentation, pausing (on the slide entitled, “*Understanding URI's 2021 Rankings*”), while asking if anyone had any questions. Ms. Cook stated that she was surprised at the “finance per student” ranking, asking if that is not surprising to anyone else, while also noting the debt after graduation ranking as not as bad. President Dooley stated, “I think what that basically means is how much we spend per student and the source probably comes out of IPEDS or some similar database.” He added that, “without any doubt whatsoever, we spend the least; we are the most efficient University between Virginia and Maine— no question about it in terms of expenditures per student. We spend less than all our peers and that reflects two things: state appropriations and the history of state appropriations, and tuition rates. And, URI has been in that position for a very long time— you might call it highly efficient on one side which would be one way to look at it; and the other side, would be while you're not spending as much in these critical areas as your peers do; and so therefore, we don't believe the quality that you provide your students is as high as it should be. And that's what that metric is speaking to.”

Chair Heenan stated that as a matter of clarity, the ranking title should read: “expenditure per student,” and concurred with President Dooley's point that the presumption isn't that every dollar spent by the University is a dollar toward quality and excellence. Adding that, “I think we would challenge that

relative to areas where we've delivered value and efficiency, and this is an area where you're penalized for doing so.” Mr. Stringer concurred that the ranking reflects “expenditure per student,” and Chair Heenan asked him to correct the slide to say, “expenditure per student,” so as not to invite confusion in the future.

Ms. Fannon stated that she would, “like to say something additional about the peer reputation, particularly on the US News and World reports, because it's twenty (20) percent weighted, and it highly influences our rankings overall. And I thank David for explaining how simplistic that part of the research is, in recognizing that, as you know, I've spent my whole life in marketing and branding and perception, even with a ton of money behind it, it is a hard thing to move. It's really, really, important to be surgical about the pressures that we apply there. I also wanted to point out John, I think the last time we talked about this, the reputation data is three (3) years old, isn't that correct?”

Mr. Stringer responded saying that “it depends on the survey itself as the US News is about a year old the Times Higher Education is a little bit older. Times Higher Education does weighted average of responses over time. I believe US News only uses the most recent response.”

Ms. Fannon responded saying that, “not only is perception lagging reality, but reality is lagging reality, so you know the next year may be a little bit better, but just for all of us to keep in mind, perception is an amazing thing to try to change. There are areas that we can surgically apply— resources, we just have to have expectations in terms of how fast that particular metric can shift which, in fact, then impacts our overall ranking. And one other note is, David mentioned that there are very few if any case studies on universities and colleges who have moved their rankings substantially in a short period of time. There were a couple who did, one was Texas Christian University, and so I called them to find out what it was that they did. In addition to some strategic moves they made, the one thing he pointed out to me is you cannot underestimate the power of going to the Rose Bowl. So, sports are an important part of it, as well as academics, so just something for us to keep in mind, too, when we see a lift of a college or university sometimes it's not the outcomes of the university focusing on education, it's the activities that are important to the school, like sports.”

President Dooley commented that “Boston College is still enjoying the “Hail Mary” Flutie effect that moved their rankings dramatically. And, they've stayed high, and they've done a lot of great things; they are a fine institution. I'm not demeaning them in any way, but they will say (at least they did back in the day), the biggest, most important thing that improved their status was that game.”

Ms. Nicolato commented that, “I think about all of this specifically as a parent of a child in the next few years, I will be looking at these rankings for my kid; and the fact that, 1) the rankings don't match reality; 2) that it's utilizing these momentum influencers; and 3) that there are things like being ranked a top party school from thirty years ago as influencers today. So, I appreciate this conversation and really having a firm understanding as to how this all is influenced; (it) makes me question if I will use these personally when evaluating for my own child, because it's not reality.”

Mr. Stringer replied, “this is just a reminder the rankings exist for one reason, and one reason only, and that's to make the publishers money. They draw traffic to the websites they used to sell magazines; they

still sell books, and that's why the rankings exist. That being said, they do have very real impacts on institutions. They affect the number of applications institutions get, they affect the employability of your graduates, and so, it's not that we can ignore them, but I think we do have to acknowledge that they exist only to make money for the publishers.”

Ms. Cook stated, “to Diane's point, perception is reality in marketing, and John, following up on what you're saying, there's a lot of studies that have shown that the resources can dramatically change when these rankings change and so I agree with you Courtney, you know, maybe you don't weigh them as highly, but a lot of people do. Working on our improvement here is important to the University amongst many things, but it's important to get the credit for what we're doing. And it is going to take time as Diane said, these things always take a long time, but you'll never change them if you're not really working on them. So, I think it's an important element.”

Ms. Nicolato responded that she agrees wholeheartedly and “I think we need to put the resources and time into it. I'm just thinking that I'm coming out of this conversation blown away by the Doug Flutie effect, and the fact that we were ranked as the number one party school, is still part of that. I think I can still understand a few years ago here and there, but when talking about generations, literally, it is definitely of concern.” Ms. Cook responded noting that it was perhaps closer to forty years ago. Chair Heenan referenced Dr. Montilla Edmonds and Ms. Cook's earlier questions, “if you look at Northeastern, if you look at NYU, there are a lot of schools that have materially moved the dial, in part through campus-based initiatives that they would have done anyway, and in part, based on deciding that such things matter that would spark a virtuous cycle around reputation that was worthy of investing in. Even if the process is far less than scientific, I do think this is a really good grounding tool for all future conversations that includes a look at schools like UCSB or Northeastern or others to say, what happened there.”

Ms. Mahoney then introduced Ms. Acciardo, remarking on her incredible background and expertise and explained that Ms. Acciardo has been a part of a number of initiatives, including the branding initiative that launched URI's current brand. Ms. Mahoney also informed the Committee that Ms. Acciardo would review what the University has been working on related to rankings (stating that as President Dooley pointed out), in its more recent work that they've been focused on. Ms. Mahoney further communicated to the Committee that Ms. Acciardo will then go into the second topic of the agenda and would be joined by Heather Colby; together, they would walk the Committee through the marketing and communications review for this year.

Ms. Acciardo thanked Ms. Mahoney, Committee members, Trustees, and special guests for their time and began her portion of the presentation. Ms. Heenan asked Ms. Acciardo to reiterate what the actual open rate was for the direct email communications sent out during March of 2019 and in January of 2020. Ms. Acciardo stated that the first email was sent to more than one thousand (1,000) recipients and had a seventeen (17) percent open rate; while the second mailing had an open rate that doubled to realize a thirty-four (34) percent open rate.

Chair Heenan stated that the open rates were “extraordinarily high.” Ms. Acciardo concurred while also stating that, “it is well beyond standard, and that given that Christian Amanpour was the lead story, that

may have had something to do with it. But we also did do careful selection of the subject line in the pre-header text, which sounds very tactical here, but it's often the deciding factor when someone chooses to open up an email or not.” Ms. Acciaro continued with delivering her portion of the presentation.

Mr. Nicolato stated, “this is great, and I think incredibly comprehensive; and I appreciate that. One of the things I was chatting with Kelly about on the side is LinkedIn and LinkedIn sponsorship has been incredibly valuable for us [The United Way of RI]. We work with corporate entities, higher ed is another one, I love seeing that as one of the methods of the integrated strategy plan.”

Chair Heenan stated that she had a question for Linda and Kelly, “which is seeing the Brown School of Public Health officials who are deployed on all sorts of national media routinely and as the COVID crisis enters the realm of therapeutics and vaccines, and with that dimension of public health and public safety, are we putting particular resources or muscle behind our experts being out and as visible as thought leaders as possible? Are we giving them help and support to make sure that URI branding is alongside those appearances when they happen?”

Ms. Acciaro replied to Chair Heenan saying, “we have been working with faculty, particularly in the health collaborative, pharmacy, nursing, health sciences with regard to COVID and we have created various expert tip sheets. One of the recent stories that we developed is on the vaccine development, and we had four or five faculty members who were part of that story. So, what we did, was we run the story on the home page. We also used it as a lead piece in our newsletter, and then we also created a tip sheet to put our faculty out there for expert commentary on this topic. We do provide resource to the faculty and we do work with them.”

Ms. Mahoney addressed Chair Heenan stating her point, “it is really strong for us right now; we're fortunate that we're entering the vaccination stage, because we do actually have a pretty decent bench of expertise in inoculation. I think you all probably saw the email Christine sent out to the Board last week that actually highlighted this story. We will continue to look for opportunities to engage those experts, in the same way you're seeing some of the Brown medical researchers and faculty out there talking about the virus; so, we will continue our public relations and media relations. Our team is really good at pitching these experts whenever they're needed. One of the well-known examples where we have really excelled at this, believe it or not, is in explosives and Department of Defense work. We have a faculty expert that is featured many times a year, on every major national news broadcast related to the expertise that's been developed at URI in explosives detection. It is an unfortunate topic that has to be covered, but nonetheless we have standing there now. Similarly, you'll see experts coming from the Graduate School of Oceanography, quite often in national stories; so, for URI, I think having the health collaborative now, and the three colleges integrated and working together, I think you'll start to see us enter that space more often in the media now that we have a really deep bench there; and we are working to promote them.

Dr. Montilla Edmonds stated that she “wanted to comment, you know being clear across the country unfortunately, I don't get to see URI a lot in the media, but one story did jump out at her, on the local news when the students developed a mask, and that was a great story. It was so nice to see it and be out, and I just want to comment personally as well, when I do interviews, I try to mention how important it is



for us to be alums.” Chair Heenan stated that it was great to hear that the mask story had reached Dr. Montilla Edmonds in California.

**b. Annual review of the University’s marketing and communications program**

Kelly Mahoney introduced Heather Colby, assistant director for brand marketing and advertising at the University and asked her, along with Ms. Acciardo, to present URI Advancement & External Relations Marketing Communications Overview (revised 12.15.2020). Ms. Acciardo started speaking first, followed by Ms. Colby.

After Ms. Acciardo reviewed her portion of the presentation, Ms. Colby began her remarks (related to advertising, social media, web, The University of Rhode Island Magazine, and measurements) by presenting the 2019 and 2020 recruitment advertising strategy and campaign.

Ms. Colby also spoke about the new cinematic and storytelling creative that was developed for the campaigns, which has proven to improve engagement and click-through rates, year over year. The multi-channel strategy between traditional and digital activations, including optimizations, continues to reach target audiences. Ms. Colby also shared the importance of the University’s most public-facing engagement and digital marketing tool, social media, and how the team has developed cutting-edge creative, like face filters and live Q&As to improve engagement on platforms like Instagram. Additionally, a small test via TikTok was conducted within the advertising social strategy.

Ms. Colby stressed the importance of the web redesign that improved user design and interface. Almost all of the college pages have been redesigned and department pages continue to roll out with the new design. Ms. Colby also spoke about The University of Rhode Island Magazine as the premier University 56-page print publication. The strategy of engaging readers through polls, photo contests, and other pieces continue to support a successful mix of community engagement.

Chair Heenan asked Ms. Colby if the webpage’s “call to action buttons” hits were evenly distributed noting that while highly unlikely, were the hits heavily weighted toward admissions? Ms. Colby responded saying that the hits were heavily weighted towards admissions, and this year, the “apply button” took over the “tour button” because of COVID, saying that the apply button was up by eleven (11) percent. Chair Heenan mentioned that the “tour button” was reinforcing the campus as an attractor. Ms. Colby also stated that giving is also up by eight (8) percent; and is, more than likely, due to the University’s capital campaign.

Lastly, Ms. Colby shared measurement KPIs (key performance indicators), and current trends in "exceeding", "meeting", and "areas of challenge" for the marketing strategy. Paid social ads VCR (video completion rates), Instagram stories, media stories, and URI News email open rates are exceeding, while Facebook follower trend growth, action bar call to action buttons on the web are meeting goals. A challenging area is pageviews on primary landing web pages, the home page is down (-10%), which may be due to specific keyword search by potential audiences that take them directly to the page they're looking for (not the home page). Ms. Colby concluded her portion of the presentation

with a mention of the multiple awards received by the marketing department due to their cutting-edge design and content.

**c. Outlook on 2021 government relations**

Ms. Mahoney stated that she had a quick update, but that she will have a full agenda item at the January Committee meeting as she will know more in January than what is now known related to government relations.

Ms. Mahoney provided highlights related to the current year budget which is also scheduled to be discussed and voted on (as the same day of today’s December 16<sup>th</sup> Committee meeting), by the Rhode Island House of Representatives, and then by the Senate.

Ms. Mahoney shared information about the General Assembly and noted that the Governor did provide \$14M in federal funding relief to the University, stating that “this is really incredible news that allows us to be only about \$1M less in our state appropriation than we had planned for. So, we're actually really well positioned for this current fiscal year.” Ms. Mahoney continued saying that “the big unknown that could change all of that, is our spring enrollment, so it will be critical for us to maintain our enrollment numbers for the spring semester in order to weather this next part of the fiscal year.”

Continuing with her remarks, Ms. Mahoney stated that, “two key things that were included was that we did get some RICAP funding to help us do regular maintenance and upkeep of our buildings; and that it also includes the Fine Arts bond for the University of \$57.3M. It will likely be question one in a special election that will take place on March 2<sup>nd</sup>. That will likely be a mostly mail ballot election.”

Ms. Mahoney also stated that, “the fiscal year 2022 budget has been delayed, so the Governor now does not have to submit that budget until March. And, finally, just some things to take note of going into this next General Assembly session: there is new leadership in the House, there will be new leadership and committees both in the House and the Senate have made some changes. It's unclear how the legislative agenda will unfold mostly because of the situation with COVID. There's a couple of legislative activities the University may want to take up, but we won't really have a good sense of that until we get through the next month or so.”

Chair Heenan thanked Ms. Mahoney, the Committee members, special guests, and those who presented sharing their knowledge and expertise.

**4. ADJOURN**

Chair Heenan called for a motion to adjourn the October 23, 2020 meeting.

On a motion duly made by Vice Chair, Mr. Sabitoni and seconded by Dr. Karina Montilla Edmonds, it was

VOTED THAT The University of Rhode Island Board of Trustees University Advancement and External Affairs Committee adjourn the meeting of December 16, 2020.

VOTE: The motion passed unanimously, and the meeting adjourned at 2:32 p.m.

**The next URI Board of Trustees University Advancement and External Affairs Committee Meeting is scheduled for January 14, 2021.**