

Defining the Future of the University of Rhode Island: An Academic Vision

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NOTE: This draft vision is a set of ideas about what our university can become and stand for in the future. It is meant to simply be the beginning of a dialogue with our faculty and other stakeholders. It is neither a blueprint nor a set of promises. We welcome your input to the ideas presented and especially invite new and alternative ways to define the future of the University of Rhode Island. The ideas put forth are informed by intensive dialogue and debate among the institution's deans and vice provosts and reflect conversations with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee and Joint Strategic Planning Committee. Those colleagues are commended for their ideas and institutional commitment. We all look forward to a continuing conversation.

“Universities should be willing to take on intractable problems. If we don’t, who will?”

Robert Klitgaard 2008

“One of the paradoxical characteristics of our time is that some of the most creative thinking comes from business, politicians and other community leaders rather than academe. ... there is an urgent need for academe to connect more directly and boldly with the large questions of our time ...” -- World Universities Forum 2008

Advancing Our University

We have before us an opportunity and responsibility to define the future of the University of Rhode Island. As a community of teachers, scholars, and citizens, we must rise to the occasion and collectively chart a focused path to fulfill our destiny and contribute meaningfully to the world being shaped around us. Our current funding paradigm is ineffective and our system of operation is not sustainable. The need for change is urgent and the time for change is now. Most importantly, the opportunity to help reshape the world through knowledge, innovation, exploration, and discovery is compelling, necessary, and timely. This vision is simply a beginning – a set of ideas to stimulate the thinking and action of the URI community about a new, hopeful, and viable path to the future for our university.

Higher Education in a Changing World

Thomas Friedman has popularized the concept of global interconnections or “the flat world.” Furthermore, contemporary and local dialogue has been expanded to include evolving, yet at times abstract, economic frameworks, such as the knowledge, information, and innovation economies of the future. Indeed, the world is changing rapidly and the global economy and workforce are pervasive. Employment sectors are now mobile, our energy future is unclear, the earth is warming, our ecological life support systems are compromised, and issues of poverty, injustice, disease, and war are driving forces in shaping local, national, and global opportunity and societies. The demographic profile of our nation is evolving and economic forces increasingly influence access to education, employment potential, and quality of life. So, what is the essential role for higher education in this changing world? More specifically, where do we, at the University Rhode Island (URI), fit into the higher education marketplace?

Given the knowledge-intensive and rapidly evolving local and global economy, higher education must play a major role in preparing our increasingly diverse and mobile society for inclusion in the future. This includes restoring fundamental literacy in science, technology, and mathematics, articulating the interdependence of humanity with the natural world, insuring an understanding of the social systems that shape our societies, and promoting an appreciation of the creative, spiritual, and empathetic dimensions of the arts. It also must include preparation for new opportunities and innovations, such as service science, entrepreneurship, information technology advancements, global awareness, and leadership. Our institutions must be adaptable and our graduates more nimble for the future uncertainties that will certainly arise. Indeed, the work of the academy matters in the world. This work, however, is not only about us as teacher-scholars, but also about the greater good and the collective future of humanity.

This potential transformation of purpose for higher education represents an extraordinary opportunity for the University of Rhode Island. No doubt we are a financially constrained institution, but also an amazingly resourceful community of teachers, scholars, and learners. We can focus our work on those elements that matter, build a bridge to “real” local and global communities, streamline our own bureaucracies as a demonstration of agility, create new digital learning centers in our libraries, and direct our limited resources toward addressing the most compelling challenges facing humanity in the new global century. We can transform all of our activities --- from classroom and online instruction to laboratory, field, and creative scholarship to the development of the infrastructure of our campus and more --- to demonstrate models of learning

and discovery. Indeed, there is an essential role for URI; a role that must define the future of our university.

Vision

The University of Rhode Island will be an institution of choice for students and faculty. Our emphasis on *interdisciplinary, problem-based, and experiential* learning and discovery connects us with the world and is reflected in a *contemporary liberal education foundation* that is truly liberating; our distinctive strengths in the arenas of *integrated health systems/sciences, engineering-physical sciences, and sustainability-life sciences* translate into learning and discovery that matters deeply in the world.

Distinctive Niche in the Higher Education Marketplace

Considering the changing nature of the world, the potential interface of those changes with higher education, and the assets of our institution and location, we envision for ourselves a distinctive niche for our institution in the higher education marketplace.

The University of Rhode Island is a learning-centered research university with an unwavering commitment to student development as global, accountable, and ethical citizens. Our research enterprise addresses, first and foremost, the most compelling challenges facing Rhode Island, the nation, and the world in the new global century. Our location in the Ocean State highlights our appreciation of both “sense” and “stewardship” of place, and our commitment to simultaneously advancing an ethic of sustainability and economic vitality.

We fully recognize that the challenge is not simply to articulate a special niche for our university, but rather to actually work together as a community to translate elements of this vision and niche into programs, projects, and experiences that will ensure a vibrant and vital future for our institution and a meaningful impact on the world.

Principles to Guide Our Future

The following principles --- **value, self-sufficiency, entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, and pride** --- should become part of the fabric of the URI of the future.

- **Value** of the URI experience for students, staff, and faculty is paramount. This includes the academic and co-curricular experience of our students as well as ensuring balance and respect for the critical work of the faculty.
- **Self-sufficiency** is essential in order to meaningfully shape our own destiny. This relates to the generation of new revenue, the allocation of our human and financial resources, and changes in our culture of doing business. We must be willing to create our own future.
- An **entrepreneurial spirit** will lead to new opportunities and partnerships that advance our work. We will need to look externally before internally for resources, leverage resources, and invest in that which we say we value.
- **Innovation** will lead to new integrative approaches to teaching, scholarship, partnering, and problem solving and ensure our relevance in the evolving knowledge- and information-based economies.

- We must embrace a sense of **pride** in our university. This means celebrating the extraordinary work of our faculty and students, encouraging high expectations, and fostering a new “*culture of achievement*” that permeates our campus and community.

Institutional Values and Academic Priorities

Our changing nation, including the rapidly evolving employment sector, presents both challenges and opportunities for our university. We need to simultaneously be both more efficient and entrepreneurial agents for change in society. We must find ways to connect what we stand for (i.e., our values) with those aspects of learning and discovery that highlight our strengths and aspirations. Figure 1 illustrates a vision for the University of Rhode Island --- a comprehensive learning-centered research university --- that offers a context for learning and a set of institutional values related to our academic priorities and potential for societal contributions.

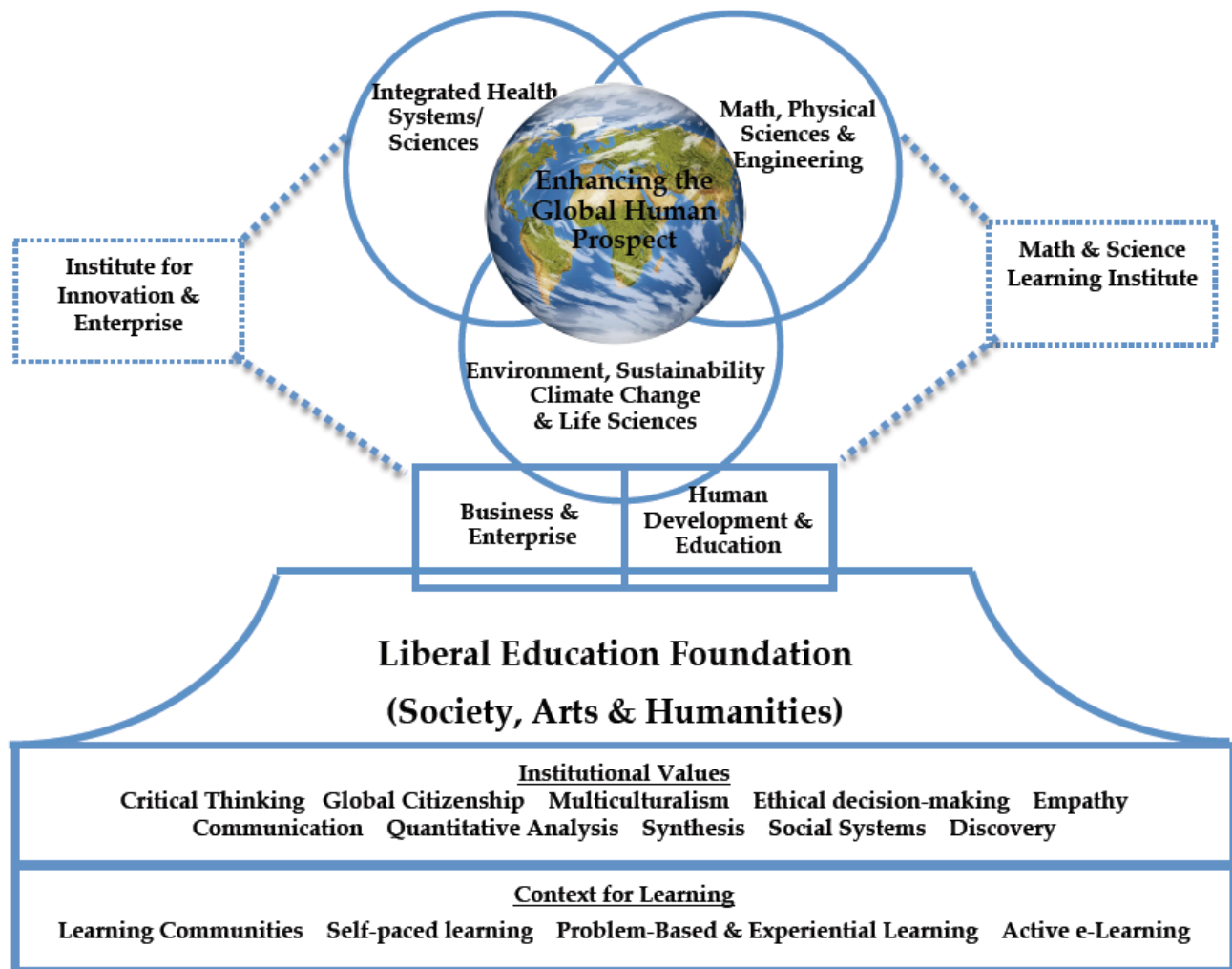


Figure 1. A vision for URI illustrating the interconnections among context for learning, institutional values, academic emphases and societal value.

A Core Set of Values is Fundamental to Our University

Our goal is for our students to *think critically*, and for each of us to recognize our roles as *global citizens*. We view active **discovery** as foundational, and recognize that it is the “impact” not just the “doing” of that work that really matters. We are an institution that understands and values the essential contributions of *multiculturalism*, *ethical decision-making*, and a capacity for **empathy** in creating an equitable campus and world. We strive to model these values in our own community. Through our programs and community relationships, we encourage and value the critical importance of *communication*, *quantitative analysis*, and *synthesis* and fully recognize that the understanding of *social systems* is essential for our students to develop their full potential as global citizens. We embrace *a context for learning* that is built upon a *learning communities* concept that thoughtfully and rigorously supports student success by encouraging *self-paced learning*. We are committed to *problem-based, experiential, and active e-learning* as pedagogical approaches to actively engaging students as well as ensuring both their and our connection to the work of the world.

Future Academic Priorities Reflect Extant Strengths in a Changing World

We envision two categories of priorities as core to our future and essential to ensuring relevance in the global marketplace. These priorities reflect our existing strengths and the rapidly evolving needs of society and economic development. First, the following **cross cutting themes** are relevant to future work conducted throughout our institution and beyond:

- *Interdisciplinary Learning and Discovery* – collaborative work encouraging synergistic thinking that extends across departments and colleges;
- *Global Awareness and Global Change* – a global perspective fundamental to the student experience and our understanding of human-induced global changes, including ecological, economic, and human well-being dimensions;
- *Sustaining Vibrant Coastal Communities and Ecosystems* --- reflects our comprehensive commitment to serving the distinctive social, economic and ecological elements of the Ocean State that can serve as a model for the world;
- *Partnerships* – creating synergies with businesses, non-profits, and agencies that leverage and expand our capacity and impact.

An additional set of priorities emphasizes broad disciplinary and interdisciplinary arenas tied directly to our strengths, the need for expertise and literacy in the STEM fields, and emerging priorities for economic development in Rhode Island and throughout the world. We envision a URI of the future built upon “interconnectedness” and deep collaborations and the mixing of disciplines that fosters a new kind of learning and discovery. Critical to our future is a focus in the following thematic areas:

- **Contemporary Liberal Education Foundation**
- **Integrated Health Systems/Science**
- **Engineering/Physical Sciences**
- **Sustainability/Climate Change/Life Sciences**

We further envision strong and critically important emphases in **Business/Enterprise** and **Human Development and Education** that are fully interconnected with these strengths. Capturing such

synergies could be both efficient and distinctive. Ensuring structures and incentives to encourage such synergies is essential. To facilitate these interconnections, we can envision creating interdisciplinary Institutes that simultaneously serve the needs of our students, interests and expertise of our faculty, and critical needs in Rhode Island and throughout the world.

For example, a **URI Math and Science Learning Institute** could address the declining math/science literacy of our state and nation. Such an Institute would capitalize on our extant expertise in education and math/science disciplines to ensure the education of a new generation of scientifically literate teachers, while providing life-long enhancement skills to existing science and math teachers already in the workplace. An interdisciplinary **Institute for Innovation and Enterprise** would capture our expertise in business and economics to help translate new discoveries and applications from within the URI research community into pertinent workforce and economic development opportunities. Indeed, our need and desire to develop a diverse and qualified workforce centered on integrated health fields, the rapidly expanded service sector, new product design, renewable energy systems, ecotourism, and the evolving “green” economy are critical to the future human condition and vitality.

Strategic and Sustainable Budgets and Resource Allocation System

To advance toward any vision, an institution must develop a strategic and sustainable budget that reflects investments in priorities for the future. Indeed, the budget becomes the visible manifestation of that strategic plan. As such, the strategic plan that may develop from a vision such as this must also be a resource allocation plan. We envision a transparent budget process for the future that includes a formal budget submission and justification from each college or unit. These submissions should reflect internal dialogue and planning within colleges and articulate the manner in which each element of the “interconnected” institution can contribute to the advancement of academic priorities and the continuing evolution of our vital university of the future.

Embracing Change

As an academic enterprise, we need to maintain a sense of restlessness to effectively unleash our intellectual capacity, potential for innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit. Emerson’s suggestion that “...people wish to be settled; (but) only so far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them” also pertains to institutions and organizations. This is a time for our university to be a bit “unsettled” to ensure we continue to be an evolving enterprise – one that is adjusting, adapting, focusing, and fine-tuning – to remain relevant and vital in a changing world.