

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

**“GLOBAL PROSPERITY THROUGH
COLLABORATIVE INNOVATION AND
PASSION FOR INQUIRY”**

THINK BIG  WE DOSM



Donald H. DeHayes
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
January 2009

THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND

*“A vision is not just a picture of
what could be;
it is an appeal to our better selves,
a call to become something more.”*

Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Author’s Note

This vision is a set of ideas about what our university can become and stand for in the future. It is meant to be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue with our faculty and other stakeholders leading to a strategic plan for the Division of Academic Affairs. The intent is not to try to highlight every department or discipline, but rather encourage each unit to navigate the landscape of ideas represented and identify your pathway to the future.

Acknowledgment

The ideas put forth in this vision build upon the University’s branding initiative and were informed by intensive dialogue and debate among the deans and vice provosts and reflect conversations with the Faculty Senate Executive Committee and Joint Strategic Planning Committee. Ideas were reshaped and reconsidered based on extensive and thoughtful commentary and conversations with hundreds of URI faculty representing departments, colleges, and councils from throughout the university. This dialogue helped me better understand URI and the expertise and disciplines that define our university. It also reshaped my own thinking about the potential role of our university in the world. I am grateful for your input, interest, and commitment to advancing our university and look forward to a continuing conversation.

Advancing Our University

We have before us an opportunity and responsibility to define the future of the University of Rhode Island. The world is changing rapidly, the global economy is in disarray, and our government, corporate, and educational institutions are struggling to find their place and sustain their meaning. The need for change is urgent and the opportunity to help reshape the world through knowledge, innovation, exploration, and discovery is compelling, necessary, and timely. This vision is meant to be 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.” Cultural exchange is rapid and 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. Indeed, as emphasized by the World Universities Forum, “there is an urgent need for academe to connect more directly and boldly with the large questions of our time.” So, what is the essential and distinctive role for The University of Rhode Island in this changing world?

Given the knowledge-intensive and rapidly evolving local and global economy, we at URI 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, ensuring a thoughtful and nuanced understanding of the social, cultural, and historical forces 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 management advancements, civic engagement, global awareness, and leadership. Our institutions must be adaptable and our graduates more nimble for future uncertainties that will most certainly arise. Indeed, the work of the academy matters in the world. This work, however, is not primarily about us as teachers and scholars, but also about the greater good and the future of humanity.

This prospective transformation of purpose for higher education represents an extraordinary opportunity for the University of Rhode Island. We must 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 and innovation, transform our libraries from archives of knowledge to gateways for active learning, 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. To move forward, we must resist being satisfied with the *status quo* and instead open ourselves to change, including all of the uncertainty and discomfort that it brings. It’s time to reclaim and redirect our university. Our future is about embracing a new culture of commitment to global prosperity through collaborative innovation and a passion for inquiry.

A Foundation of Scholarship and Commitment

As teacher-scholars we have an extraordinary opportunity and responsibility to assemble, analyze, and disseminate knowledge and stimulate the creativity of energetic lifelong learners in a manner that can enhance the human prospect. Indeed, this may be the essential role of our university. These learners range from undergraduate and graduate students to citizens, working professionals, and civic leaders and, of course, our selves. While our foundation must be in high quality, relevant, and meaningful research, scholarship, and creative work, it is the “impact” and “innovation,” and not simply the “doing,” of that work that really matters.

As a public institution steeped in the values of our land, sea, and urban grant commitment, we must strive to both advance knowledge and contribute to the development of our students and our communities to becoming viable, responsible, and productive. Much has been made recently about the need for more research as the key to our economic future. For the most part, more of the same research will not itself enhance the human condition or economic opportunity for the majority. As we strive to advance the human condition (in Rhode Island and beyond), we must embrace a new “scholarship of innovation” that moves us from the traditions of scholarly work steeped in *describing problems* to a focus on *designing solutions* leading to a sustainable and desirable future. This evolved form of scholarship remains grounded in a context of scholarly publication and projects. However, it further requires integrated approaches, collaborative partnerships and innovation, faculty-student teams, and interdisciplinary learning and discovery. Exceptionally executed, it will lead to real world solutions and a new prosperity characterized by enhanced individual and societal well-being. As such, commitment to innovation and solutions can become our intellectual destiny.

Vision

The University of Rhode Island will be the institution of first choice for students and faculty. 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 distinctive strengths in *integrated health systems*, *engineering-physical sciences*, and *environment/alternative energy/green economy* translate into learning and discovery that matters deeply in the world. We strive for global prosperity through collaborative innovation and passion for inquiry.

Distinctive Niche in Higher Education

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 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 understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures and 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. Indeed, our future is in our own hands.

Principles to Guide Our Future

The following principles --- **value, self-sufficiency, entrepreneurial spirit, innovation, and pride** --- must 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 our investments, and invest in that which we say we value.
- **Innovation** will lead to new integrative approaches to teaching, scholarship, partnering, and viable solutions and ensure relevance in the evolving knowledge- and information-based economies.
- We must embrace a sense of **pride** in our university. This means fostering a new “*culture of achievement*” that permeates our campus and community and celebrating the extraordinary work of our faculty and students.

Institutional Values Are Fundamental

Our changing nation, including the rapidly evolving employment sector, presents both challenges and opportunities for our university. We need to simultaneously be more efficient and effective and serve as 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.

“Critical thinking”, “engaging the mind”, “lifelong learning”, “communication skills”, “quantitative reasoning,” “appreciation of the arts, culture, science, and society,” and more --- are important and commonly held goals for student learning. In addition, we are an institution that understands the critical importance of **global citizenry** in today’s world and the essential contributions of **multiculturalism, ethical decision-making**, and a capacity for **empathy** in creating an equitable campus and world. We must model these values and insure our students are steeped in them as well.

We embrace a context for learning built upon a vibrant and integrated concept of **learning communities** that thoughtfully and rigorously supports student success by encouraging *self-paced learning* --- including accelerated programs for our most able students. We are committed to *problem-based and experiential learning* as pedagogical approaches to actively engaging students as well as ensuring both their and our connection to the work of the world. Recognizing the rapid societal transition to an information-driven world, we engage students through *active e-learning, online instruction*, and by insuring our graduates exhibit sufficient *information literacy* to address the challenging interdisciplinary problems of the world.

Future Academic Priorities: Deploying Our Extant Capacity in a Changing World

Our academic priorities reflect our existing strengths and rapidly evolving needs of society. We envision a URI of the future built upon “interconnectedness” and deep collaborations and a collegial mixing of disciplines that fosters a new kind of learning and discovery. The following **cross cutting themes** are critical to our future in a changing world:

- *Interdisciplinary Learning and Discovery* – Most of the large questions of our time and seemingly intractable societal challenges represent a complex mix of cultural, socioeconomic, and scientific perspectives. Most universities are not well positioned to deploy the multitude of expertise and resources, nor capture the necessary synergistic thinking that is essential to innovation and solution-driven teaching and research. We must build on our best practices of interdisciplinary work, such as the International Engineering Program, Coastal Institute, and Center for the Humanities, and excel in this arena.
- *Global Awareness and Global Change* – Global awareness is critical in a “flat world” and understanding of human-induced global change, including ecological, economic, and human well-being dimensions, is fundamental to the student experience. Our strength in foreign languages and potential for global partners is critical to our future. Moreover, we have an essential responsibility to assure that our students are prepared global citizens.
- *Sustaining Vibrant Marine Ecosystems and Coastal Communities* --- Our strength and global reputation in marine sciences and coastal resources and communities extends across college and department lines and 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* – Universities won’t achieve excellence in isolation. Partnering creates opportunities for collaborative innovation and co-investment that creates 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 extant expertise (>120 faculty in each area), the need for knowledge and literacy in the STEM fields, and emerging priorities for economic development in Rhode Island and throughout the nation and world. Critical to our future is a focus in the following **academic and evolving professional thematic areas**:

- **Fundamentals of Liberal Learning and Scholarship** – Knowledge is organized into disciplines most often characterized by the traditional liberal arts disciplines and the scholarly

underpinnings of these domains of knowledge. An understanding of the world gleaned through the lens of the arts, culture, sciences, and society is an essential, but incomplete, element of the liberally educated citizen for the 21st century. Liberal education also embodies a dimension of social responsibility and empowerment that prepares students to actively embrace complexity, diversity, and change and to apply knowledge and skills as responsible citizens. We at URI are committed to a comprehensive view of liberal learning and scholarship as essential preparation for the work of the world.

- **Integrated Health Systems** – Health and health care is the fastest growing sector of the national economy and a critical field laden with economic and ethical dilemmas, but also enormous opportunities. URI’s expertise in the broad arenas of health systems and science across the university is further bolstered by unique strengths in the life sciences, behavioral sciences/systems, health psychology, and professional programs that connect directly to health and wellness.
- **Engineering/Mathematics/Physical Sciences** – Our understanding and design of complex infrastructure systems and new products is increasingly dependant on our ability to integrate new knowledge and information with systems thinking, creativity, and a capacity to grapple with complexity. The integration of mathematics, physical sciences and engineering offers promise for a better world and business opportunities essential for a vibrant workforce and economic opportunity.
- **Environment/Alternative Energy/Green Economic Opportunity** – Marine sciences, global change, ecosystem services, alternative energy, and sustainability are critical elements of a hopeful and viable future for our state and nation. Work in these areas directly influences quality of life, economic vitality, and the long-term viability of humanity. Our strengths in oceanography, life sciences, economics, natural resources, and more serve to re-enforce this rapidly evolving field. Ecological restoration, carbon trading, wetland banks, wind energy, biofuels, and green design are just a few examples of a hopeful and productive future prospect.

Addressing Complex Global Challenges: Some Possible New Initiatives

Learning centered research universities are in a unique position to deploy their intellectual capacity and potential for innovation to address the major issues in the world. Addressing complex societal issues, however, will require new approaches, collaboration, and synergies at the interface of disciplines, functions (teaching, scholarship, and outreach), and sectors (non-profit, government agencies, and business). Ensuring structures and incentives to encourage essential synergies will promote our distinctiveness. Interdisciplinary Institutes that simultaneously serve the needs of our students, interests and expertise of our faculty and partners, and critical needs in Rhode Island and throughout the world could be a viable way to move forward. Examples of some possible Institutes that could emerge at URI are as follows:

Math-Science Learning Institute – would 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.

Institute for Innovation and Enterprise – Science alone will not lead to innovation and prosperity. Understanding of business models, markets, and economics can 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.

Institute for Applied Ethics – Ethical decision-making and moral reasoning is at the heart of a just and equitable society. At the same time, unethical behavior has become prevalent and problematical. Drawing from philosophy and modern day ethical dilemmas in health, business, politics, engineering, education, and environment, such an Institute could help students, faculty, and citizens think more deeply about moral issues and ethical responsibility.

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. The strategic plan that will develop from this vision must also be a resource allocation plan. We are implementing 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. With the courage and commitment to seek new pathways, directions, and solutions, we can take back our university and pave a path to a new vision for the University of Rhode Island.

INSPIRING STUDENTS TO CHANGE THE WORLD



REQUIRES A UNIVERSITY
THAT CHANGES WITH THE WORLD.

THE
UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND

THINK BIG



WE DOSM

