



Rhode Island news

Panel: URI must boost its research

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Arguing the state university lags so far behind in its research capacity that drastic action must be taken, a commission today will recommend several steps to bolster research at the University of Rhode Island designed to make the university more competitive and the state's economy more vibrant.

A key recommendation urges a \$100-million bond referendum in 2010 to attract 20 to 30 top researchers to URI and upgrade research infrastructure. Other recommendations include ensuring that the school's next president, who will be hired next year, has experience encouraging research, and changing state regulations to give the university more autonomy and flexibility in hiring, pursuing grants and investing money.

The URI Commission for Research and Innovation, which was created in 2006 by legislative statute, will present the report to the state Science and Technology Advisory Council at the council's quarterly meeting at 10 this morning. Last fall, the nine-member commission hired a consultant to analyze URI's research capacity and compare it to peer institutions as well as powerhouse research universities. The report, compiled by Providence-based Clarendon Group, cost \$85,000.

The report showed that URI is sorely lacking in its research capacity, said Robert G. Flanders, chairman of the commission. Between 1996 and 2006, for example, federal research and development grants increased by 117 percent, according to the National Science Foundation. However at URI, such financing increased just 29 percent during that 10-year span. If URI had been as aggressive as the similarly sized University of New Hampshire, the study found, URI's research financing would have been \$119 million in 2006, instead of the \$47 million the university received.

"For the past 10 years or so, URI has not done well, and in fact has missed a real wave of research effort nationally," said Flanders, who also chairs the state Board of Regents for Elementary and Secondary Education. "We feel we must take bold steps at this point. Studies show that for every \$1 million invested in research, 36 jobs are created, and these are good jobs, high-paying, cutting-edge, technology jobs — the kind of jobs we want to grow in Rhode Island."

Longtime URI President Robert L. Carothers announced last month that he will step down in June, after 17 years. More recently, Carothers has placed a higher priority on research — an effort the next president will be expected to build upon, said Jack Warner, state commissioner for higher education.

"The question for the next president is how do you build on that and focus attention on the research mission of the university as well as developing other funding streams," Warner said. "We need someone with a thorough understanding of the role of a research institution and a track record of success in order to enhance

research performance.”

Last year, Carothers hired Peter Alfonso to oversee research, elevating his \$180,000 vice provost position to a cabinet-level vice president position. URI also created an independent Research Foundation to help faculty commercialize their inventions and form spin-off companies. The foundation recently hired a vice president and assistant vice president to work directly with professors and researchers. The university also hopes to eventually open a research and technology park north of campus, directly across from a \$60-million biotechnology center under construction.

Alfonso, a member of the URI research commission, said these investments are already paying off, but said more needs to be done.

“In the month of September alone, we brought in \$20 million in grants. In three months, we’ve brought in \$32 million, all in brand-new awards,” Alfonso said. In contrast, in fiscal year 2008, URI received a total of \$67 million in grants.

Saul Kaplan, executive director of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation and a member of the commission, said boosting research at URI is essential to “increase our state’s innovation capacity and create better jobs for Rhode Islanders.”

“We want to create a much stronger research network across the state and take advantage of the 11 colleges and universities we have here,” Kaplan said. “We need our colleges and universities to be a critical driver for economic growth. We need URI to be an economic engine and a key contributor and to produce a pipeline of well-trained graduates who can work in a 21st-century knowledge-based economy.”

URI, says Kaplan, needs to run “less like a government agency and more like a business.” Among the recommendations are allowing URI to build new dormitories without legislative approval and making workers university employees, rather than state employees.

The report stops short of calling for the privatization of URI, but President Carothers has said publicly that if the trend of diminishing state support continues at its current pace, URI will receive no state money by 2013, and will be, in effect, an institution entirely funded by tuition, fees and grants.

This year, the state is contributing just 11 percent of URI’s operating budget. A decade ago, the state contributed 26 percent.

The report calls for URI having greater freedom in spending money, constructing buildings, hiring for grant-funded positions and pursuing grants. Currently, state regulations require the university to follow state purchasing guidelines and hiring caps that can hinder pursuing federal money, say higher education officials.

“We hope the report ... translates to greater autonomy,” Alfonso said. “We had a case with one of our outstanding faculty, a chemical engineer who received an \$800,000 grant from the National Science foundation to buy a fancy piece of lab equipment, a state of the art electronic microscope.” Because of strict state purchasing rules, the professor had to wait a year to buy the microscope. “He lost a year of research,” Alfonso said.

Flanders says the commission now hopes to form an “implementation committee” that will work with state lawmakers to change regulations and get legislative approval for the \$100-million bond referendum.

To see a copy of the report, visit: <http://stac.ri.gov/news/2008/10/07/uri-commission-report/>

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