

March 25, 2025

The Honorable Joe McNamara, Chair  
House Committee on Education

RE: House Bill 5601

Dear Chairman McNamara and honorable members of the House Committee on Education,

I am writing regarding H. 5601, which would amend the Rhode Island Board of Education Act with regard to the Council on Postsecondary Education and the Commissioner of Postsecondary Education.

The University of Rhode Island continues to enjoy a strong, fruitful partnership with the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner. University leadership, myself included, is grateful for the relationship with OPC and the opportunities we have recognized for synergy and collaboration between the University and OPC.

However, in reviewing this bill as written, we have identified areas of concern or needing clarity. In several instances, “public institutions of higher learning,” or similar, are referenced under the purview of the Postsecondary Commissioner. However, the University’s Board of Trustees pursuant to R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-32-2, is “successor to all powers, rights, duties, and privileges for the university of Rhode Island formerly belonging to the council on postsecondary education pertaining to postsecondary education.”

Additionally, the bill outlines a strategic plan for public higher education to implement the goals of the Board of Education’s strategic plan. The language within the legislation is vague as to whether this would include the University of Rhode Island, and while we are happy to collaborate on a statewide plan, the University has already drafted and adopted our own strategic plan.

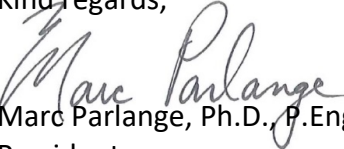
The development of URI’s 10-year strategic plan, Focus URI, was led by a dedicated steering committee composed of faculty, staff, and students, and co-chaired by the Faculty Senate president and myself. This strategic plan exists as an agile, dynamic document that will evolve as necessary to enable the University, its stakeholders, and the community to respond to changes in the world and our state while maintaining a steadfast commitment to our land- and sea-grant missions, our institutional vision, and our foundational values. By developing and executing this existing strategic plan, the University is best positioned to continue its work in research, student success, and transformative progress.

University faculty, staff, and leadership work tirelessly to advance the vision and mission of URI and to ensure that the institution continues to serve Rhode Islanders while expanding our presence as a global research university. These efforts have been widely successful under the leadership of the Board of Trustees, which has taken on its responsibilities and duties with unwavering commitment since its establishment in 2020 after a deliberative legislative process.

The University of Rhode Island remains committed to its partnership with OPC and will always be open to opportunities for synergy and collaboration. However, I would ask that the bill be amended to exempt URI, as the University has in place its own governance structure, and clarified, per R.I. Gen. Laws § 16-59-13, in areas that reference “public colleges,” “public institutions of higher learning,” and “words of similar import” that the terms do not apply to URI.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the University’s concerns about this bill with the committee and remain grateful for the General Assembly’s support of URI, the Board of Trustees, and all Rhode Island students.

Kind regards,

  
Marc Parlange, Ph.D., P.Eng.  
President

c: Senator Dominick J. Ruggerio, President of the Senate  
c: Representative K. Joseph Shekarchi, House Speaker