



March 11, 2026

**The Honorable Louis P. DiPalma, Chair**  
**Senate Committee on Finance**  
**Rhode Island State House**  
**Providence, RI 02903**

**RE: Testimony in Support with Recommendations – Governor's Proposed Budget Article 7 Sections 4&5-- Higher Education (Hope Scholarship at Rhode Island College)**

Chair DiPalma and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of **United Way Rhode Island**, we **support, with recommendations**, the Governor's higher education budget provisions to make the **Hope Scholarship at Rhode Island College** a permanent program. Making Hope permanent and providing in-state RIC students with **tuition free** junior and senior years, reduces **cost barriers**, improves **time degree completion**, and strengthens Rhode Island's **workforce readiness**.

United Way's policy and advocacy efforts follow our strategic framework: **Strong Families, Strong Nonprofits, Strong United Way**. We prioritize policies that strengthen household stability, expand access to opportunity, and ensure that public investments deliver measurable value. **Higher education affordability** is directly tied to family stability and the state's long-term competitiveness.

**Recommendation 1: Create a comparable "last dollar" pathway at URI so dollars follow the student.**

Rhode Island's public higher education strategy should not stop at one campus. A statewide promise design that includes the **University of Rhode Island** and offers a comparable last dollar award for eligible Rhode Island residents would help retain high-achieving students, support pipelines in high-demand fields, and respond to the regional **enrollment cliff**. Structuring the program so dollars follow the student promotes equitable access across institutions while maintaining fiscal control.

**Recommendation 2: Align the investment with a clear talent retention strategy to keep Rhode Island students in Rhode Island.**

URI is the state's flagship research university and a primary source of talent for priority sectors. Building on URI's existing merit platform, the state can layer a simple, automatic scholarship for Rhode Island residents who meet defined academic thresholds. This approach reduces net price, boosts degree attainment, and keeps more graduates in state to meet employer demand, which maximizes the return on the state's investment.

United Way Rhode Island appreciates the Governor's commitment to higher education affordability and urges the General Assembly to strengthen the package by ensuring equitable access across the public system, including URI. Converting Hope to a permanent program is a strong step. Pairing it with a **dollars-follow-the-student** option at the flagship, and a clear talent retention strategy, will maximize impact by supporting family stability, improving completion, and building Rhode Island's long-term workforce competitiveness.

**United Way Rhode Island respectfully urges your support for the higher education article with the recommendations above.**



Sincerely,

**Elijah McLean**

Manager, Government Relations & Policy

**United Way Rhode Island**