

Enrollment Management Consulting Report for the University of Rhode Island  
Executive Summary

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In October I was asked to serve as a consultant in the area of enrollment management. My charge was to assess the following areas: admissions recruitment efforts, the efficient use of campus based financial aid, how the campus organized to influence student persistence, optimal recruitment/retention efforts especially for students of color, and the relationship/impact of campus facilities on recruitment and retention goals. During a two-day period I met with a variety of campus administrators and faculty members. This executive summary includes an abstract of key strategic and operational recommendations.

*Strategic Recommendations*

1. URI should appoint a senior enrollment manager. This individual could be a new vice-presidential appointment or it could be an associate provost. Once appointed the campus also needs to develop a strategic enrollment management plan.
2. The University needs to appoint 2 FTEs that are focused exclusively on enrollment management research in the areas of financial aid, enrollment projection modeling, and retention research.
3. Campus stakeholders have several questions about the recruitment and retention of students of color. To answer these questions requires additional research. Taking action

on recommendation two above is necessary in order to understand these issues.

4. The University needs to be more intentional about attracting transfers students. URI should look closely at the possible use of the Providence campus as a “front door” to attract more transfers. It also should review how academic course offerings and articulation policies. The admissions office needs more staff devoted to recruiting transfers students.
5. The campus should devote more attention to student persistence and identify a senior administrator to be responsible to developing programmatic activities to enhance persistence.
6. Senior campus policy makers and deans should continue to review the classroom, laboratory, and housing capacity of the campus to make sure that enrollment goals do not outstrip the physical capacity of the University.

#### *Operational Recommendations.*

1. Senior administrators should seek a consultant (or conduct a study of peer institutions) to look at the size of the admissions staff and the level of campus support. There is reason to believe that the staff is too small and has inadequate resources. It is possible that the campus could rely less on financial aid to achieve enrollment goals with a more robust admission staff. In addition members of the president’s cabinet should take the same campus tour that prospective students experience to assess the quality of campus facilities used during the tours.
2. As soon as possible, senior policy makers should look carefully at the current distribution of financial aid dollars. Large investments may be going to students in programs that would enroll a sufficient number of good students with less financial aid.
3. URI should more effectively use the Honor’s College as a recruitment vehicle for high ability students.
4. The University should consider taking low cost steps to attract more international undergraduates.
5. The campus should provide annual enrollment reports to relevant campus stakeholders in order to build more understanding and support for enrollment management efforts in the areas of recruitment and retention.

#### **Enrollment Management Consulting Report for the University of Rhode Island**

As the percentage of state budgets going to public colleges and universities continues to decline, an increasing number of public colleges and universities are falling into a class of campuses that might be labeled tuition dependent public institutions. This statement is certainly true of The University of Rhode Island. The state has never provided large levels of support per FTE student and in recent years state appropriations per enrolled student have continued to decline. As a result of mounting enrollment and financial pressures I was asked by President Robert Caruthers to serve as a consultant to review and assess the enrollment management activities of the campus and to pay particular attention to the following issues: the efficacy of admissions recruitment efforts, the efficient use of campus based financial aid, how the campus organized to exert a positive influence upon student persistence, optimal recruitment/retention efforts especially for students of color, and finally, the relationship/impact of campus facilities on recruitment and retention goals. During a two-day period I met with a variety of campus administrators and faculty members including: the president, the provost and

members of her administrative team, deans and associate deans of academic units, student affairs administrators, University College, institutional research, planning, finance, admissions, enrollment services, and members of the faculty senate.

Based upon reports that were sent to me and my interviews with key campus stakeholders six broad themes emerged from my consultation: organizational leadership and planning, the effective use of financial aid and enrollment research, recruitment and retention of students of color, developing transfer capacity, and overall campus retention efforts, and institutional capacity. As senior policy makers read through this report, it will be evident that these themes are not mutually exclusive. In addition, I want to note an important limitation of any consultation. I was on the campus of the University of Rhode Island for two days. I also had an opportunity to read many reports, but at best I have only an incomplete picture of issues and activities that might influence the success of efforts to shape enrollments at the University of Rhode Island; campus stakeholders are in the best position to determine “when I got it right” and how to make the best use of this report. Finally, it is worth noting that I have never been on a campus consultation before where everyone made unsolicited positive comments about their level of respect for how hard the individuals associated with admissions, enrollment services, institutional research, and University College work and their level of dedication to the University. This is certainly noteworthy.

My report is organized into three sections: strategic issues, operational issues, and a conclusion.

### Strategic Issues

*The Need for an Organizational Leader & Enrollment Planning.* The University has devoted considerable time and effort in the area of strategic planning. As a result it has a strong overarching strategic plan in place which provides an excellent foundation to develop a more focused strategic effort in the area of enrollment management. However, one of my strongest impressions of enrollment activities at URI is how decentralized it is. Several key offices (enrollment services, admissions, and University College report to the provost’s office, but it is my impression that the responsibilities of this office are too large and that at least for the moment, no one in the office has the time and/or expertise to play a leading role in enrollment management activities for the campus. Right now, the campus has a number of functioning committees in place that bear on enrollment management efforts including the Enrollment Management Committee, the SAT Optional Committee, and the Branding Committee. These are important committees that are focused upon issues that will advance enrollment efforts at the University. Nevertheless, one of my concerns is that each of these committees is considering issues that could bear upon campus enrollment management efforts. It is my impression that no senior administrator is able to devote significant amounts of time and energy to systematically track these discussions in order to consider what they might mean for campus enrollment policies and practices.

Tangible evidence of the problems in this area include the fact that the admissions staff do not yet think they have been notified of specific campus enrollment goals for the entering Class of 07. Although the campus planning does an excellent job of laying out broad goals for admissions, this is not sufficient because specific goals can change from year to year and yet be consistent with broader campus goals. An admissions office

needs to have a sense of specific goals with regard to quality, diversity, and resident and non-resident students. Ideally they would have this information in early summer in order to develop a plan for the coming year. Additionally, there is no enrollment management plan that could be used to help guide the recruitment and financial aid plan for the next 2-5 years.

The campus is investing large amounts of money in financial aid, and to a lesser extent to admissions recruitment. The strategic coordination of these two offices is critical for the campus to effectively use its resources to achieve enrollment goals. University College has taken a leadership role in the area of first year retention efforts; however, its scope is currently confined to areas related to the mission of the College. In addition, I saw no evidence that there is a coordinated effort devoted to sophomores or upper division students in the areas of student success and persistence. I also offer additional observations related to persistence efforts and the potential role of University College later in this report.

In addition to the need for a senior enrollment officer, the campus also needs an enrollment management plan. The plan should identify enrollment and retention goals for the next three to five years. The report should be data driven and should identify the resources that will be required to achieve these goals. At the moment, it is doubtful that the campus has either the administrative expertise or the analytical capacity to construct such a report. Putting this report together should be one of the first charges for a senior enrollment officer if appointed, and sufficient analytical capacity must be made available to help develop such a report.

Intentionally, I never make specific suggestions regarding the location of enrollment management efforts. I believe that the traditions and norms of each campus should shape these decisions. Nevertheless, I would recommend that the campus establish a senior administrative position to coordinate enrollment management efforts. Whether this position is a free standing vice-president or should become a position in the provost's office is a decision that should fall to the president.

*The Effective Use of Financial Aid, Enrollment Research, and Enrollment Modeling.* The campus has made a substantial investment in financial aid. It is attempting to use financial aid to improve quality and also to provide adequate need-based financial aid. I have never conducted a campus consultation where so many campus constituent groups raised financial aid concerns, particularly related to need-based financial assistance.

However, at the moment, it is impossible for me, and I suspect for campus administrators, to make analytical data-driven decisions about the adequacy and efficacy of financial aid for merit and for need. The campus is currently operating on a combination of the collective wisdom of a small group of campus administrators and the power of the anecdote. It is entirely possible that the wisdom of the campus administrators is generally on target. However, during my visit I found groups asserting that the enrollment surge was due to the "phone-a-thons" conducted by the faculty while others suggested that it was the additional financial aid that individuals were offered during "phone-a-thons" and other contacts with prospective students late in the recruitment cycle. These assertions may be true, but it is also true that students who are still considering URI late in the recruitment cycle are already more likely to enroll. And (I say tongue in cheek) if you offer someone a scholarship who is already coming, or who

is already strongly leaning toward coming, s/he will accept any offers and scholarship yield rates on offered scholarships will look very high. I am always skeptical of high yields on campus scholarship offers, it often means that the data are being collected wrong or that offers are going to students who would have enrolled with a smaller scholarship or no scholarship. URI needs to invest in the capacity to analyze the effectiveness of their financial aid offers and other recruitment initiatives.

Having strong enrollment analytical capacity can yield many benefits. The same student data base that is used to conduct financial aid research can over time be used to develop sophisticated enrollment projections for new students and returning students which would help the campus project fiscal and academic needs earlier. These same data sets can be used over time to conduct more rigorous studies of student persistence patterns. The URI aid budget is now approximately \$20,000,000. If no other funds are available, funding two analysts out of this budget would more than pay for the investment over time. I would recommend that the campus invest in the appointment of two FTEs analysts to work specifically in the area of financial aid research, admissions modeling and projection studies, and retention research.

The charge for my visit included a request that I offer suggestions about building a good retention data system. Developing a good longitudinal enrollment data file can also be used to model student persistence behavior. This will give the campus the capacity to drill down and look at retention problems across student sub-groups such as students of color, residents and non-residents, transfer students, specific majors, and so forth.

During my conversations with several campus administrators I had the sense that many individuals realize that the campus needs more capacity in this area. Another question that was raised during my conversations was whether additional IR staff should be housed within the University administration; there can be synergies for a campus IR organization if a number of analysts are located within one group. However, in many instances I have seen staff who could be devoted to enrollment related research reassigned to undertake other work related to state and federal reporting requirements, campus capacity studies, and other tasks. In addition, the Office of Institutional Research has lacked stability with respect to where the office is housed and its reporting relationships. This instability increases the possibility that adding analysts to work on enrollment management research to the IR office may not result in a constant focused set of analyses to assist with enrollment management efforts. Thus, the key question for senior URI administrators is to decide where it would best to place additional research analysts. If there is any question as to whether or not these individuals would be devoted to enrollment research if they were placed within a larger IR office then they should be made part of the enrollment management unit.

*The Recruitment and Retention of Students of Color.* There is much to be done in this area and in many respects this is an easy section of the report to write. URI appears to be getting more and more successful in recruiting students of color. However, this population also has a high attrition rate. Everyone attributes this attrition rate to financial aid and this might be correct. However, the campus simply lacks the capacity at the moment to look carefully at this population. URI needs to use multivariate analyses to look at the contributions that academic preparation, financial need, amount of campus based financial aid, and academic major, for example contribute to student persistence. Perhaps the University is admitting too many students who have very little likelihood of

graduating no matter how much financial aid they are given. This is an important area, but one at the moment for which minimal descriptive data and anecdotes are driving institutional policies and practices. I want to reiterate, the descriptive data and anecdotes may be pointing the campus in the right direction, but given the investment being made in this area I recommend that the University invest in research capacity so that campus administrators have a better sense of the impact of programmatic interventions and other efforts. Hiring an experience enrollment officer will also help. S/he will be able to contextualize URI efforts in a broader array of what other campuses are doing and have more experience to draw upon.

*Developing Transfer Capacity.* During the next 10 years the proportion of traditional age high school graduates that have been a major source of new first year students is going to decline in Rhode Island and surrounding states. The strategic plan of the University calls for an increase in transfer students, but this goal has yet not been realized. This goal should become a key goal for the enrollment management plan I referenced earlier in this report.

This is one area for which I am less confident that I talked to enough individuals to have a full sense of the level of commitment and campus capacity to attract and enroll transfer students. Readers from URI will be in a better position to develop a fuller picture of what the campus needs to do in order to more successfully attract transfer students. My primary observations would rest along the following lines. The faculty at URI, like many flagship universities, may have an antipathy at best (and resistance at worst) to enrolling transfer students. This has resulted in an academic climate that is not welcoming for transfer students. The attitudes of faculty and academic units are critical because these attitudes often drive campus policies in areas related to course articulation and transfer policies that can be a major factor in the enrollment decisions of transfer students. I was unable to get a strong sense of the role that the Providence campus currently plays, and could play, as a ‘front door’ for transfer students, but this is an area that merits serious consideration. The University will need to be more creative and aggressive in recruiting transfer students and in enacting policies that make the campus transfer friendly.

Finally, the admissions office will need more staff to successfully enroll more transfer students. The admissions office has only one full-time professional staff member devoted to transfer recruitment (and this is not the individual’s only responsibility) and little in the way of support staff focused on transfer students. The University is unlikely to be successful in expanding its’ transfer efforts without both a stronger strategic focus and a stronger operational base.

*Campus Retention Efforts.* Campus administrators lack a detailed understanding of student persistence and the factors that affect it. The Office of Institutional Research does a nice job of producing basic retention reports, but the development of effective campus-wide strategies requires focused attention that goes beyond standard reports. There is no senior administrator who systematically guides campus efforts in this area. University College does an excellent job of providing a strong set of transition programs and academic support for first-year students. This unit may be in a very good position to provide oversight in this area. The other likely location for such efforts would be in under the umbrella of the senior enrollment officer if URI does move forward an appoint such a person in the near future.

*Institutional Capacity.* During my discussion with the deans, there appeared to be

widespread belief that the University lacks the physical capacity to serve the additional number of students that URI seeks to enroll. Several individuals pointed to the new residence halls as a step in the right direction. However, they noted more housing is needed. More vexing, if accurate, many faculty and academic administrators suggested that classrooms are already holding more students than they were designed to serve and that the capacity of lab sciences are already overtaxed to a near crisis point. URI's strategic plan calls for additional substantive increases in undergraduate and graduate enrollment. If the perceptions about classroom, lab space, and housing are correct, these limitations may jeopardize plans to grow enrollment without action in this area.

### Operational Questions and Recommendations

In addition to these strategic recommendations several operational issues arose during my consultation that I address in the second part of this report. They range across several areas of the University. I briefly enumerate them below.

1. Senior administrators should study the size and structure of the admissions staff and the level of support provided by the campus. I did not spend enough time with this group to have a clear sense of their staffing and levels of support but based upon comments offered by members of the admissions staff and other more indirect indicators I saw reasons to believe that the admissions staff may be too small. This study could be done by a consultant or a trusted campus administrator could be charged with contacting peer institutions to collect data on the size of their admissions staffs and levels of funding. The current model of part-time *road runners* is antiquated and reinforces my impression about the level of staffing and support. In addition, they may lack sufficient financial resources to purchase student names, mount aggressive e-mail and web-based marketing efforts to continue to successfully achieve the enrollment goals of the campus. It is possible that the senior policy makers will discover that the campus could rely less on financial aid to achieve enrollment goals with a more robust admission staff.

In addition, I would recommend that the senior management team go on a typical campus visit that prospective new students undertake when they come to campus for the first time. They should start at the visitor's center, proceed to the admissions office, and then on to the campus overview session in the student union. During this visit campus policy makers should be trying to view the experience from the perspective of a potential new student and his/her parents and the kind of first impression that is created. Enough anecdotal comments were made during my time on campus to raise questions about the need for more attention physical attractiveness of the URI campus visit.

2. As soon as possible, senior policy makers should look carefully at the current distribution of financial aid dollars. The large investment being made in Pharmacy students, for example, is unlikely to achieve many strategic objectives. Many of these students are likely to enroll without any financial aid. If there are other high demand programs that garner large shares of campus merit aid they should be carefully examined. URI may need to allocate some of its aid resources to each school/college in order to rationalize the allocation of aid, otherwise aid dollars may flow disproportionately to students who would enroll without large

scholarships. In general I heard too many statements that suggest that aid dollars are too often allocated on the basis of anecdote and not invested strategically. Distributing financial aid to academic units make the awarding of financial aid more complex and requires even more careful monitoring and analysis. I can provide some additional insights into a process like this if requested.

3. The University may not be getting the maximum recruitment return on the Honor's College. There are many psychic benefits associated with being admitted to a high demand/high status program such as the campus Honor's College. During my discussions it sounded like URI made decisions to enroll students in the Honor's College after they had been admitted and matriculated. If this is correct, the University should consider using admissions at the time of matriculation as an incentive to recruit and enroll more high ability students. Coupled strategically with financial aid, the Honor's College could play an important role in efforts to recruit talented students.

4. For a public university, in a desirable location, URI enrolls remarkably few international undergraduates. URI invests so little in international recruitment that it is possible that the campus could achieve some solid enrollment increases in this area. International recruitment could be enhanced with modest investments in staff, an enhanced web site, and the use of express mail services. These efforts should precede any large scale investments in international travel. I can offer some specific suggestions in this area to appropriate staff if there is an interest. For this report I have elected not to go into this much detail.

5. The campus should provide annual enrollment reports to a wide range of campus constituents. Annual reports describing who is enrolling and who leaves would help build a better base of understanding of campus enrollment efforts, the challenges of achieving them, and the rationale for institutional efforts in this area. By linking the budgeting process and the distribution of resources more directly tied to student enrollments, annual enrollment reports will help to focus the attention of deans and the faculty on enrollment related issues and result in more support for campus efforts to increase success in the areas of admissions and/or student retention.

#### Future Possibilities and Recommendations

In the next ten years the University of Rhode Island faces some important enrollment challenges. The competitive marketplace for nonresidents and the decline of high school graduates in Rhode Island and the entire New England region will make it difficult for the campus to maintain current enrollment levels let alone increase them. The University has a strong foundation to move forward that is built around the campus plan. However, it is likely that URI will require a more focused effort in order to achieve its enrollment goals. The campus needs a senior enrollment officer to manage and coordinate its enrollment efforts. In addition, it also needs to invest more resources in enrollment related research and analysis. Most visibly, in the area of financial aid, the University spends a great deal of campus resources in financial aid with little data based evidence of the efficacy of these expenditures. Once a leadership structure is in place a



strategic enrollment management plan should be developed. URI should also devote more focused attention on the structures and strategies it has in place to recruit transfer students. Finally, the University should also give more attention to studying student retention issues and charge a senior campus administrator with managing these efforts. The most likely candidates for this task would be either the new senior enrollment officer that could be appointed as a result of this report or the Dean of University College.