



Academic Affairs and Student Success Committee Meeting

Wednesday, January 7, 2026

**Rhode Island Nursing Education Center
350 Eddy St., Providence, RI 02903 | Room 327
Meeting Minutes**

Chair Michael Mello called this meeting to order at 4:30 pm and acknowledged that a quorum was present.

Council on Postsecondary Education present:

Michael Mello, Chair
Lawrence Purtill
Jeffery Williams

Council on Postsecondary Education absent:

None

Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RIOPC) staff present:

Jailene Colón, Coordinator
Greg Ebner, Assistant Commissioner, Academic Affairs and Student Success
Jackie Xiong, Executive Assistant to the Commissioner and Council Liaison

Rhode Island College (RIC) participants:

Manyul Im, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs
Cindy Kozil, Vice President for Student Success
Donald E. Tencher, Director of Athletics & Executive Director of the Anchor Fund

Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) participants:

Elizabeth Del Sesto, Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs
Greg LaPointe, Vice President for Student Affairs and Chief Outcomes Officer
Barbara J. Nauman, Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs
Lauren Webb, Director of Academic Program Review and Accreditation
William Stargard, Dean of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies

1. Acceptance of the Agenda

Director Tencher reported that student-athletes perform academically at a rate approximately 23 percent higher than the general student population. He attributed this success to dedicated academic support structures, including an athletics academic building and a student success lounge that supports study halls and early academic engagement. He outlined a five-point freshman support plan focused on early outreach within the first seven weeks of enrollment, required study halls, and regular meetings with mentors and advisors.

Director Tencher also noted recent recognition from the *Providence Journal*, naming RIC as the best venue in the state to watch a sporting event. He reported that the athletics department has raised approximately \$1 million through fundraising efforts, primarily from alumni, to support facility upgrades. He added that RIC athletics has a contract with FloSports to provide broader access to athletic events and continues to prioritize consistent mental health training and resources for athletics staff to better support student-athletes.

b. Discussion of AASSC Calendar for 2026 (OPC)

Greg Ebner, Assistant Commissioner of Academic Affairs and Student Success, provided an overview of the Academic Affairs and Student Success Committee's 2026 meeting calendar. Assistant Commissioner Ebner explained that items listed under "Routine Reporting from Colleges" are required by existing policy, while additional topics included in the calendar reflect reports to be presented by the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, the institutions, or a combination of both. He noted that because several policy-driven items are scheduled to occur around the same time each year, the proposed calendar staggers these items across committee meetings to better balance the workload throughout the year.

c. Notices of Change:

i. New Programs:

- 1) Community Planning – Associate in Arts
- 2) Community Planning – Certificate

William Stargard, Dean of Arts, Humanities, and Social Studies at the Community College of Rhode Island, presented an overview of two proposed academic programs. Dean Stargard explained that the programs were developed in response to a shortage of planning professionals, which has contributed to ongoing housing challenges in the state. He noted a particular need for planning technicians and described the creation of an advisory board to guide the development of a new certificate program that will ladder into an associate degree.

Dean Stargard reported that the advisory board, composed of representatives from the American Planning Association, state government, and academic leadership, met twice and provided feedback and letters of support for the proposals. He added that CCRI also developed an additional certificate in Geographic Information Systems designed to support both current professionals seeking advancement and individuals entering the field.

Council Member Jeffery Williams asked whether similar urban or community planning programs currently exist in Rhode Island. Dean Stargard responded that no comparable in-state programs are currently offered.

Council Member Williams also asked about distinctions between urban and community planning and whether coursework may incorporate emerging technologies. Dean Stargard explained that community planning is broader in scope and noted that elements of emerging technologies may be incorporated as the curriculum develops.

Interim Vice President of Academic Affairs Barbara J. Nauman added that prior statewide collaboration had occurred around planning education and noted that the University of Rhode Island previously offered a master's program in community planning.

Council Member Lawrence Purtill asked about potential pathways for students following completion of the programs. Chair Mello commented on the potential for future degree development in related fields at the public institutions.

ii. New Joint Admission Agreements (CCRI)

1) Fine Arts Transfer, Music Education – B. of Music (URI)

Dean Stargard introduced a new Joint Admissions Agreement with the University of Rhode Island for a Bachelor of Music in Music Education. Dean Stargard noted that the agreement supports students who intend to pursue careers in music education rather than performance and provides a clear pathway for their academic and professional advancement.

2) Mathematics Transfer, Data Science – B.S. (RIC)

Elizabeth Del Sesto, Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs at the Community College of Rhode Island, introduced a new Joint Admissions Agreement with Rhode Island College for a Bachelor of Science in Data Science. Assistant Dean

Del Sesto noted that all Joint Admissions Agreements have been reviewed and formally approved by RIC Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, Manyul Im.

d. Preview of NECHE Standards (CCRI)

Lauren Webb, Director of Academic Program Review and Accreditation at the Community College of Rhode Island, led the discussion on the updated 2026 standards of the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE). Dr. Webb highlighted NECHE's 10-year review cycle and noted that changes to the standards reflect alignment with federal and state regulations as well as NECHE's internal policies. The number of standards has been reduced from nine to five, streamlining prior requirements. Dr. Webb also explained that NECHE now evaluates schools based on their mission, post-graduation outcomes, and return on investment for students.

Council Member Williams requested clarification regarding the review of curricula and degrees offered in languages other than English. Director Webb explained that CCRI already addresses these considerations in its review processes.

Chair Mello asked how often institutions are reviewed under the new standards. Director Webb responded that RIC and CCRI have recently undergone review and will be evaluated again according to the updated standards.

e. Discussion on Retention and Graduation Rate Metrics

Assistant Commissioner Ebner led the discussion on retention and graduation metrics at Rhode Island's higher education institutions. He noted that this topic would be the committee's focus over the coming year and presented graduation rate data from the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) and Rhode Island College (RIC), including comparisons with state and national averages. He highlighted that retention is a key indicator of student engagement, which is closely tied to graduation outcomes. The discussion emphasized the importance of benchmarking institutions against peer schools and pursuing multi-year strategies to surpass regional and national averages.

4. Action Items

- a.** Approval of the recommendation to the Council for its approval of an amendment to Council Policy S-12 (Joint Admissions Agreement).

