

URI AAUP NEWS

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND CHAPTER - AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

PRESIDENT: Cate Morrison
VICE PRESIDENT: Erik Loomis

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PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

by Cate Morrison

Hello again friends! This semester I write to you filled with evangelical love and respect for my colleagues here at URI. I know that we can trust one another, because I have seen that trust in action, and I believe that those bonds are stronger than any bullet.

The Fall 2025 semester had a very weird ending. After the tragic shooting at Brown University and shelter-in-place orders affected students, staff, faculty and administration, the University of Rhode Island made exams and final work due on or after December 15 optional. The majority of Fall 2025 finals and papers were either substantially changed or effectively canceled with very little notice.

Now, I don't know about you, but I DID NOT take it well. I had two sections of one course with two different outcomes, one with a proper final exam period and one without. I adapted a third final exercise to work remotely but had no clear sense of how many optional participants to expect (turns out the answer was "zero"). And I had a graduate course without a culminating paper. I felt incomplete, pedagogically and spiritually.

It took a reality check from colleagues in two different ways to pull me out of my funk. First, my department-mates teaching graduate students wanted to make sure we were on the same page about policy, and they took my need for confirmation in stride. Representatives of the administration intended to draw a clear brightline from Monday the 15th on, and administrators have the right to make decisions about final exams. The answer is the answer. What I learned from the good people of COM is how to adapt. They kept a laser focus on being fair to and consistent with our students while letting me have my long, dark night of the soul. When I got the clarification I needed, we pulled together.

Just because I accepted the reality of the situation didn't mean I liked it. I accepted the practical wisdom and virtue of my co-workers, but I still didn't feel right. A second meeting changed that feeling. The Psychology Department welcomed a new colleague in the middle of the academic year, and I was invited to provide information on the Union. Unsurprisingly, URI faculty wanted to talk about

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LABORFEST AT URI!

by Erik Loomis

On October 4, 2025, the hard work of a group of fifteen faculty paid off when URI/AAUP hosted LaborFest, a labor teach-in that brought in speakers, union members, and community members from around URI, the state of Rhode Island, and southern New England for a day of organizing training, solidarity, and fellowship. This was a great event and an example of what our union can be if we choose to organize.

The day started with a powerful speech from Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg Amore, who reminded us of the power of unions, how we can organize politically to move the state in the direction we want to see it go, and the importance of civic education. Secretary Amore is a long-time friend of organized labor in Rhode Island and he reiterated that in his talk titled "Labor's Role in Defending Democracy." We greatly appreciated him taking time out of his busy schedule to address us.

The day also had two time slots of breakout sessions. They provided attendees opportunities to organize, learn, and teach. URI councilors gave part of their Saturday to help attendees manage their own mental health in this time of political crisis, a critical need for so many of us. There was a great panel of historical resistance in times of oppression that combined members of the URI Department of History with faculty from other institutions in New England to provide critical perspective on how we defeated far-right politics in the past and what we can learn about saving democracy and freedom today. Finally, two organizers from the Rhode Island National Education Association ran a workshop on how we can use the idea of solidarity both in and outside the workplace to create the kind of justice that unions stand for.

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EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S COLUMN

by Jay Walsh

URI's Current Context

I sat in an interview for the position of Dean of Arts & Sciences the other day. The candidate remarked about how great URI is and how well the institution is moving forward. A faculty member in the meeting remarked "I'm glad that's what it looks like from the outside because it certainly doesn't feel that way from a professor's perspective." That exchange encompasses the feelings of most people I speak to on campus.

Fewer than one-third of faculty have an experienced dean

Some of you are in colleges with stable leadership, effective communications, and a culture of supporting co-workers. Most of you are in less certain situations. Almost half of all full-time faculty currently work in a college with an interim dean. When almost half of the full-time faculty are laboring in that context, there are bound to be disputes and difficulties in your workplace. There is no certainty about the future. There is no ability to plan for the future. There is constant stress about previous expectations and having to establish relationships with short-term leadership. In addition, one-third of the faculty work in a college where the dean has two years of experience at URI, or less. In some of these cases, new or interim deans bypass collegial discussions with faculty. In the worst cases, some deans mask authoritarian tendencies with disguises of compassion, empathy, and understanding in meetings. In other cases, deans simply remove people who speak truth to power, ask difficult questions, or are otherwise considered impediments to the dean's wishes.

Surviving and thriving

The only way to survive and thrive in these instances is to band together as faculty. Practice solidarity by sticking up for each other. This means doing more than engaging in hallway conversations centered on "can you believe they just said that in the meeting?" It means taking direct action as collective members of the union to stand together. Educate each other about the injustices and bad practices you experience. Help each other develop skills needed to navigate through turbulent waters. Involve others in holding leaders accountable. Keep showing up for each other. Look out for junior faculty or faculty on renewable appointments who may be vulnerable to a dean's coercion.

Beware of divide and conquer tactics

Your strength lies in sticking together. When a dean pits chairs against each other, or the dean pits individual faculty against each other, the dean wins. You and your co-workers lose. You lose collegiality. You lose trust. You lose support from people in the trenches with you. You lose the voice of the faculty in contributing to the direction of your department, college, and university. It is easy for a dean to divide you because of the dean's influence on workload, resource allocation, and promotion recommen-

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LABORFEST 2025

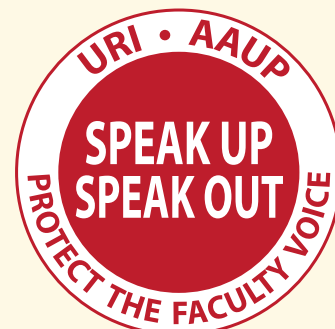
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After lunch, we had a second set of breakout sessions. URI/AAUP Executive Director Jay Walsh and members of our Organizing Committee conducted a workshop on how to talk to your coworkers to build the union. They provided lessons we could all use in making our unions stronger, our lives more attuned to ideas of solidarity, and our workplaces better organized. URI/AAUP President Cate Morrison and two other former presidents of public university faculties from New England came together for a fascinating discussion of organizing faculty. Then, immigration activists from around New England ran a critically important workshop on what we can do to protect our immigrant colleagues, family, students, and friends.

We all gathered in the afternoon for a final plenary session, with a talk from Rhode Island AFL-CIO President Patrick Crowley, who also holds a master's degree in History from URI. He told a compelling story about how former governor Don Carcieri tried to turn Rhode Island to the right and how the labor movement stood up to that. Arguing that our state could have ended up like what Florida has turned into under Ron DeSantis, Crowley powerfully centered the labor movement as a positive force in society and emphasized the role that URI/AAUP could play in continuing this history.

We received overwhelmingly positive feedback. People came from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and even Maryland. They came from over a dozen different unions around the state. Undergraduate students attended and learned and helped us learn. Community members came to both participate and attend. Never before had URI/AAUP took on such a big event. It was a complete success.

The extent to which URI/AAUP can build on this depends on you. Too often over the years, the union has meant an office in Roosevelt Hall, not you. We can do tremendous things together. But a few of us cannot make that happen. It takes large numbers of people to create the kind of powerful organization we need to have to resist the realities of Trumpism, the administration's contempt for faculty governance, and become a political force in this state. We have built an organizing committee and we need your help. Please email Erik Loomis at eloomis@uri.edu or Christine Weinkauff-Duranso at cwduranso@uri.edu



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dation. I have written many times before; deans come and go but you will be with your co-workers for decades. Your relationship with your co-workers is paramount to creating the work environment necessary for your success.

A word about department guidelines

URI/AAUP proposed the contract language about department guidelines for promotion and tenure in order to give voice and agency to faculty. Please consider what you and your colleague determine to be proper guidelines and strongly advocate for your position without caving to the dean. If the dean was intended to have unilateral authority, the Board of Trustees and URI/AAUP would have given the dean unilateral authority. I strongly recommend that you only adopt the guidelines you can live with, for yourself and for future co-workers.

Closing

Remember, some of you currently have deans who are well versed and experienced with communicating clearly and working fairly with all faculty. These cautions are not a warning against those well intended and successful deans. The University of Rhode Island is at an inflection point in its history. The institution is trying to move from a land grant institution that does the best it can do with the resources the state allocates, to a growing institution that generates resources far beyond what it generated in the past. You, collectively, have agency in guiding the direction of the university if you support each other and refuse to be divided.

URI/AAUP STAFF

Executive Director:

Jay Walsh | jawwalsh@uri.edu

Executive Assistant:

Mary Pinch | mpinch@uri.edu

Telephone: 874-2532 / 2534

Email Address: admin@uriaaup.org
www.uriaaup.org

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the sudden cancellation and ways that we were responding. One colleague found herself in a similar position to my own. Teaching students how to write research papers, she provided them opportunities to work in chunks and revise each section with feedback. At the end of the semester, students take those sections and knit together a full research paper. Thus, the problem: all of the revisions had been made, but there were no papers. "I guess they all get A's this semester," our colleague said with a wry grin. In this moment, I realized, shit happens. Sometimes, they all get A's. We didn't make this situation what it was. We can only do what is fair to both our students and ourselves. My last bit of anger dissolved.

Trust in one another is a cornerstone of solidarity. If we cannot be sure that our colleagues work under the same circumstances, have the same experiences, and aim towards the same pedagogical goals, we can't take another person's word for it. We cannot build the bonds necessary for collective action. As Kenneth Burke pointed out, any successful act of persuasion requires first identification, the recognition that I am like you. So long as I was stuck in my head, fighting my own expectations, I was alone. It took engagement with my coworkers both in the department and beyond to realize that we're all going through it together and I could trust the people around me to do the right thing. In turn, I could trust myself more. I had a renewed faith and confidence that united, even under the most difficult of circumstances, we can and will do the right thing.

We spend too much time worrying that others will do the wrong thing. This positioning creates suspicion, not support. It isolates and weakens us. We fight endless wars of all against all—a million little bullets—rather than come together to build agency and power. The end of the Fall semester, however, showed us a different vision of collective care. Together, the faculty of the University of Rhode Island are stronger than the barriers they face. All it takes is a little trust.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your concerns, opinions, and ideas

Letters to the Editor should be sent to Erik Loomis at eloomis@uri.edu