



## Rhode Island news

# URI hires research chief

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In a move designed to enhance research activity and generate money for the institution, the University of Rhode Island has hired a vice provost for research who will be charged with establishing a research foundation and overseeing the development of a commercial research park on the South Kingstown campus. Peter Alfonso, 64, a Connecticut native who is vice president of research at the University of North Dakota, signed a three-year contract and will start the URI job March 1. With an \$180,000 a year salary, Alfonso will be one of the highest paid administrators at URI. He replaces Janet Trubatch, who left URI in May 2005 to become graduate dean and vice provost of research at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

URI is expanding the top research position to include new initiatives that go beyond processing grant applications and administering money. The move underscores the university's ambition to boost the amount of research dollars coming in, to collaborate more with private industry and to help faculty commercialize their inventions.

"In the past, research offices have looked inward, to see how they can facilitate the research of faculty members," said URI President Robert L. Carothers. "But now research offices need to look outward, to see how the intellectual properties of the faculty can be turned into economic development opportunities for the region."

Alfonso is credited with more than doubling the amount of research money flowing to the University of North Dakota during his five years there, from \$38 million a year to \$95 million. In addition, Alfonso achieved two goals in North Dakota that URI has its sights set on.

The first is the creation of a stand-alone research foundation that would help faculty commercialize their inventions and build strong relationships with companies, such as defense giant Raytheon and the pharmaceutical company Amgen. The second is the building of a technology park on the URI campus that would house spin-off companies, incubator space for new ventures and research space for established companies. URI purchased 114 acres of undeveloped land to the north of the Kingston campus earlier this year and announced plans to build a research park and affordable housing for new faculty.

URI says a research park would benefit not only the university, but also the South County economy. A team of URI administrators, officials at the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation and the South Kingstown planning director will release a report about the proposed park early next year, said Robert Weygand, URI's vice president of administration.

"In the broad picture, we're talking about the transformation of the American economy as well as the Rhode Island economy, to be a more creative economy where innovation is the coin of the realm," Carothers said. "So we need to be able to bring more agility to the research process because it provides ideas and inventions to the community."

Research dollars and the possibility of commercializing technologies and other inventions also help attract and retain faculty, who could earn more money elsewhere, Weygand said.

URI CURRENTLY BRINGS in \$60 million a year in research grants. Carothers hopes that by establishing a research foundation, URI can receive \$100 million a year in grants by 2010. Alfonso said part of his job will be to offer increased support to the areas already bringing in significant research dollars, such as biotechnology, engineering, oceanography, pharmacy and psychology, as well as identify emerging areas.

"Collaboration is an essential issue in the new sciences, like genetics, genomics and proteomics. These are studies that did not exist 15 years ago, and they are multidisciplinary by nature," Alfonso said in a phone interview.

Part of his challenge will be to encourage more collaboration across departments and subject areas, such as research projects shared by URI's Graduate School of Oceanography and College of the Environment and Life Sciences, Alfonso said.

Alfonso began his academic career as a professor of speech language pathology and audiology at the University of Connecticut, where he received his bachelor's degree. He earned a master's degree from Western Michigan University and a doctorate from Purdue University. He worked as a research scientist in Connecticut, was head of the speech and hearing science department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and served as an American Council on Education fellow at Indiana University.

Before going to the University of North Dakota, Alfonso was chief research officer at the University of Tennessee and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Widely published in his field, Alfonso has been awarded more than \$14 million in federal research grants and was a 1990 Fulbright research scholar to the Netherlands and a fellow of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.