

Testimony in Opposition to H5666

We are writing today in opposition to H5666 on behalf of the members of the Rhode Island College faculty. We greatly value the members of our campus safety and security team and all they do every day for our community. However, we are opposed to taking legislative steps that increase the potential for violence and decrease the accountability of these officers, especially at the current moment given the intrusions of ICE and other increased surveillance from the federal government.

While the legislation is well-intentioned, it would not make the RIC campus safer. In fact, it would reduce safety on campus for a variety of reasons. Research shows that police use of force is one of the leading causes of death among young men of colorⁱ. Furthermore, police are more likely to perceive young Black men as threatening, even when those young men have done nothing wrongⁱⁱ. As RIC's student body has become more diverse, the implications of this risk become more profound. Students should not have to fear for their lives when walking to class, and arming the campus police would mean increasing that fear.

And our students are already scared. Scared for their futures, scared for their families, scared for the foundation of basic rights they had been raised to believe our country stood for. They come to college seeking a better life. Firearms are not a way to secure that better life. They are a way to increase the fear our students feel, fear exacerbated every time someone like them is arrested by ICE or detained by officers cooperating with ICE. As an institution of learning, we do not need to have employees who are deputized to enhance that fear.

Unlike the case at URI, RIC lies close to active police precincts and substations where armed police are available. There are three police stations or substations within roughly two miles of the Rhode Island College campus; at URI, there is only one police station within five miles of campus. Thus, any needed response from armed officers can quickly be deployed to RIC. And given the complexity of responding to active-shooter events (about half of which end before law enforcement is even on the sceneⁱⁱⁱ), arming police is not a solution to the possibility of mass shootings^{iv}. Reductions in violence, including mass shootings, are more likely to be accomplished by reducing access to firearms and increasing access to mental health services.

Finally, it is worth noting that arming the campus police would be exceedingly expensive. Costs for arming the campus police include, but are not limited to, weapons and ammunition, appropriate storage, and initial and ongoing training. The Rhode Island College administration has estimated costs of at least \$200,000 to arm the campus police force, not including ongoing costs and the increased liability and associated costs. Even if one were in favor in the abstract of arming the RIC campus police—which I am not—spending funds equivalent to the salary and benefits of two full-time faculty members is not the most prudent use of the limited fiscal resources to which we are entrusted by the people of Rhode Island, especially in times when our finances are already at risk.

H5666 would also provide campus safety officers with employment protections that go far beyond what protections other employees, like my colleagues on the faculty, are afforded. At this moment in time, when education is under unprecedented attack from our federal government and from reactionary activists, it sends a terrible message to the People of the State of Rhode Island and to our educators and students to suggest that the employees who have the authority to detain members of our community deserve more due process than the employees who are charged with carrying out our core mission of educating Rhode Islanders for Rhode Island's

future. We am not, of course, opposed to increased due process protections for all employees—for example, my colleagues on the faculty would greatly appreciate the ability to select members of the committees that hear discipline against us and to have influence on who serves as hearing officers, to have reasonable limitations on suspension from duty, and to receive other protections in line with those provided for under the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights.

The campus safety officers have done so much work in recent years to build a good relationship with the campus community. None of us would like to see that work jeopardized by just one officer unholstering a firearm in front of students. None of us would like to see that work jeopardized by an officer who is entitled to remain in service after carrying out misdeeds for which any other Rhode Island College employee would have been fired.

Therefore, we respectfully urge you not to support H5666. However well-intentioned this proposal is, it would not make our campus a safer place. Rather, it would increase the risk to our students' lives and make it harder for us to do the job of educating them, both because of the fact that it would reduce funding available for our core mission and because students who are living in fear are far less able to learn. We commend the sponsors for their interest in the safety of our students, and would ask instead that they support increased funding for mental health care for all Rhode Islanders, as such measures are likely to go far further in enhancing public safety both in the community at large and on our campus.

Dr. Mikaila Mariel Lemonik Arthur
President, RIC/AFT 1819 (the full-time faculty union)
Providence, RI 02906
mmllarthur@gmail.com

Dr. Vincent Bohlinger
Chair, RIC/AFT Committee on Political Education & Vice President, RIC/AFT
Warwick, RI 02889
vbohlinger@hotmail.com

ⁱ <https://osf.io/hw9d2/download>

ⁱⁱ <https://contexts.org/articles/black-lives-and-police-tactics-matter/>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1043986219840237?casa_token=X87jUA-1O4UAAAAA:yc-LV-IpC9XoBTg95Z9tvoBp_15UlaaGMUbK1ohmV8OICb-WV4Jp_SN_GEmqGU05Qob1hytNNsB7aA

^{iv} <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2024/03/parkland-shooter-scot-peterson-coward-broward/677170/>