

RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF THE POSTSECONDARY COMMISSIONER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

*Final Report: Committee
Recommendations*

DECEMBER 2021

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A CALL TO ACTION

Rhode Island faces two potential paths for its postsecondary system: one to greater economic equality and global competitiveness, the other to incremental progress towards its current reality and projected economic and social needs.

Over the next two years, state leaders face consequential choices that will define what the future of our state will look like, and who will receive the necessary education and training required to secure a good job.

The confluence of Rhode Island's current postsecondary attainment reality, economic trajectory, population trends, and misperception of today's higher education student, creates an opportunity to refresh how our state defines, and what it needs from the higher education community.

The data show the magnitude of the challenge ahead:

- 72 percent of Rhode Island jobs in 2030 will require education beyond high school, but as of today only 53% of working-age adults have completed a postsecondary credential in the state.
- Compared to the postsecondary attainment rate of the White population:
 - The attainment rate for Black residents is **17 percent** lower;
 - The attainment rate for Indigenous residents is **27 percent** lower; and
 - The attainment rate for Latinx residents is **29 percent** lower.
- Rhode Islanders who did not have a college degree were much more likely to have been affected by the economic shock caused by the pandemic.
 - Over the course of the last major economic recovery (from the 2008 recession), 99 percent of new jobs went to people who had education beyond a high school diploma.

Moreover, the population in the New England region is in decline, creating an environment where employers and states will compete fiercely for skilled employees. States that have aligned and coordinated postsecondary systems will win. At the same time, the general impression of whom society regards as “a college student” is skewed. In the current college population:

- 37 percent of students are older than age 25;
- 24 percent have children or other dependents;
- 49 percent are financially independent from their families; and
- 64 percent work at least a part-time job while enrolled.



A child from a low-income family in America who has high test scores has a 31% chance of graduating from a 4-year college and getting a good job by age 28, BUT a child with low test scores from a high-income family has a 71% chance of graduating from a 4-year college and getting a good job by age 28.” -Dr. Tony Carnevale, Director, Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce

We know that Rhode Islanders have both the talent and the desire to improve their livelihoods through education. Startlingly, sometimes the system works against both talent and desire.

Rhode Islanders’ abilities and desires must be met with a postsecondary system that enables them to achieve the outcomes needed to improve the lives of families as well as the state. Both bold and evidence-based action is called for to ensure the vast majority of Rhode Island residents have completed workforce-aligned education beyond high school and our industries have the talent pipeline they need to thrive in the Ocean State.

To address these challenges, Dr. Shannon Gilkey, the Rhode Island Commissioner on Postsecondary Education, formed the RIOPC Advisory Committee in Spring 2021 through a partnership with The Hunt Institute and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO).

Robert A. Weygand and Beverly Ledbetter served as Co-Chairs of the committee, guiding the committee discussions and identifying areas of consensus among members. Forty-one distinguished committee members took time out of their busy schedules to attend the series of three in-person meetings and offer input into the recommendations contained in this report.

The committee, comprised of leaders from across the state, recommends that OPC build and drive a coordinated, collective action approach to achieve significant change across Rhode Island’s higher education and workforce training systems while also narrowing equity gaps. OPC acts as the convener of both public and private higher education institutions, postsecondary education partners and industry, and thus is well positioned to do this. By operationalizing and implementing the recommendations outlined in this report, the Advisory Committee believes that all Rhode Islanders will have a stronger path to a living wage, to supporting their families, and to enjoying a high quality of life.

The recommendations of the committee centered around three main themes:

- Working to Eliminate Equity Gaps;
- Providing Direct Support for Students; and
- Removing Structural Policy Barriers.



RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF THE POSTSECONDARY COMMISSIONER ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

NAME	TITLE	ORGANIZATION
Beverly Ledbetter, Esq. <i>Committee Co-Chair</i>	Chair of the Board of Directors	Rhode Island Urban League
Robert A. Weygand <i>Committee Co-Chair</i>	Vice President	College Unbound
Andrew Cortés	Founder & Executive Director	Building Futures
Angélica Infante-Green	Commissioner	Rhode Island Department of Education
Barbara Cottam	Chair	Rhode Island Board of Education
Barry Weiner	Assistant Director	Rhode Island Department of Corrections
Cedric Huntley	Executive Director	The Nonviolence Institute
Claudia Cordon	Co-Director of Education	Progreso Latino
Cortney Nicolato	President & CEO	United Way of Rhode Island
Dan Egan	President	Association of Independent Colleges & Universities of Rhode Island
Darrell Waldron	Executive Director	Rhode Island Indian Council, Inc.
Elizabeth Winangun	Director of Policy	Office of Rhode Island Governor, Daniel J. McKee
Frank Sánchez	President	Rhode Island College
Gregg Amore	Representative	Rhode Island General Assembly
James Monteiro	Founder & Director	Reentry Campus Program
James Seveney	Senator	Rhode Island General Assembly
Javaid Siddiqi	President & CEO	The Hunt Institute
Jeffery Williams	Member	Council on Postsecondary Education
Jennifer Slattery	Director, Training & Membership	Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns
Karen Alzate	Representative	Rhode Island General Assembly

NAME	TITLE	ORGANIZATION
Kasim Yarn	Director	Rhode Island Office of Veterans Services
Linda Katz	Co-Founder and Policy Director	The Economic Progress Institute
Mackenzie Raimond	Student Representative	Council on Postsecondary Education
Marc Parlange	President	University of Rhode Island
Marcela Betancur	Executive Director	Latino Policy Institute
Marie Bernardo-Sousa	President	Johnson and Wales University
Marta V. Martínez	Member	Council on Elementary and Secondary Education
Matt Weldon	Director	Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training
Meghan Hughes	President	Community College of Rhode Island
Michael DiBiase	President & CEO	Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council
Mike Grey	Chair	Rhode Island Governor's Workforce Board
Neil Steinberg	President & CEO	Rhode Island Foundation
Paige Clausius-Parks	Senior Policy Analyst	Rhode Island KIDS COUNT
Rick Metters	Vice President, Rhode Island Regional Public Affairs and Government Relations	Fidelity Investments
Rob Anderson	President	State Higher Education Executive Officers Association
Sandra Cano	Senator	Rhode Island General Assembly
Shannon Gilkey	Commissioner on Postsecondary Education	Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
Tammy Vargas Warner	Assistant Commissioner of Postsecondary Academic and Student Affairs	Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
Thomas Izzo	Member	Rhode Island Council on Postsecondary Education
Timothy DelGiudice	Chair	Council on Postsecondary Education
Tom Giordano	Executive Director	Partnership for Rhode Island
Womazetta Jones	Secretary	Executive Office of Health & Human Services

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

To make progress toward Rhode Island’s higher education policy goals, the committee recommends action on the following strategic priorities.

Working to Eliminate Equity Gaps

As the committee talked about different ways to drive progress in higher education, the importance of focusing on equity was a major theme of their discussions. Many recommendations call on OPC to take action that would narrow equity gaps across the higher education continuum.

1. Conduct primary research among postsecondary students to identify solutions to equity imbalances in the system and change policies to remove those barriers.
2. Provide guidance on how programs designed to help current postsecondary students complete their studies can adopt a fresh equity focus that will benefit students from under-resourced communities.
3. Develop strategies for connecting students and families from under-resourced communities with resources that could help them afford the wide range of costs associated with being a higher education student.
4. Study the implications of expanding eligibility for last dollar state-funded scholarship programs, such as for non-traditional students, part-time students, and students at 4-year institutions of higher education (IHEs), to advance equity goals.
5. Concentrate on enrolling BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), immigrant, low-income, youth in foster care, those formerly incarcerated, people with disabilities, and adults 25+ in workforce development programs that award postsecondary credentials, including Registered Apprenticeships.

Providing Direct Support for Students

Conversations across all three meetings had a student-centered focus as members discussed whether the current postsecondary system in Rhode Island provides adequate support for today’s higher education students. As a result, several committee recommendations focus on actions OPC could take that would directly impact the experiences of students.

06. Advocate for additional resources—including the expansion of the RI Reconnect program—to expand on-campus wraparound supports, advising, and counseling to provide students with what they need to complete their program of study.
07. Develop a library of resources, constantly updated, accessible to students enrolled in or contemplating academic and workforce training programs so they can address barriers that might interfere with program completion.
08. Invest in the people who help higher education students navigate the process of receiving support by providing them with meaningful professional development as well as access to clear information.

Removing Structural Policy Barriers

Committee members also identified several opportunities for OPC, in partnership with other state leaders, to address structural policy barriers that prevent Rhode Island from making progress toward the state’s higher education goals.

09. Advocate for predictable funding for Rhode Island’s postsecondary system, including public and private institutions, that requires a state investment comparable to the rest of New England.
10. Develop a more robust longitudinal data system that aligns data from OPC, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (DLT), and IHEs.
11. Correct systemic issues preventing the conversion of prior learning experiences and course completions toward degree and credential programs.
12. Work with K-12 leaders to increase resources and support shown to improve the transition between high school and postsecondary settings to ensure all students are prepared for the rigor and experience.
13. Assess the needs of regional employers and implement workforce training programs statewide that will provide qualified, credentialed workers that articulate to credit at the state’s IHEs.

RECOMMENDATION DETAILS: WORKING TO ELIMINATE EQUITY GAPS

1. Conduct primary research among postsecondary students to identify solutions to equity imbalances in the system and change policies to remove those barriers.

- a. Working in partnership with education leaders, OPC should examine how policies that produce inequities in K-12 – including school funding models, access to dual and concurrent enrollment coursework, and the availability of counseling services – have implications for equity gaps in higher education.
- b. IHE leaders should work with OPC to determine whether policies that affect rising first-years (such as non-credit-bearing remedial course mandates) are disproportionately applied to BIPOC or other underserved students.
- c. This work must emphasize the importance of narrowing equity gaps for all career pathways – not only short-term credential programs aligned with in-demand industries but also baccalaureate and graduate programs, which allow graduates to earn significantly higher lifetime wages.

2. Provide guidance on how programs designed to help current postsecondary students complete their studies can adopt an equity focus that will benefit students from under-resourced communities.

- a. In the short term, OPC should work with IHE leaders to ensure that the student affairs professionals who interact with students have access to training in cultural competency; in the medium- and long-term, the higher education community should recruit and retain a postsecondary workforce whose demographics more accurately reflect the diversity of today's students.
- b. Students who historically have not been included in conversations about student supports need to be included during this and all future program design discussions and decision making.

3. Develop strategies for connecting students and families from under-resourced communities with resources that could help them afford the wide range of costs associated with being a higher education student.

- a. OPC should work with other state leaders to ensure that the tuition and fees that fall on higher education students and their families are reasonable and affordable to all Rhode Islanders.
- b. OPC should work with education and financial aid stakeholders to catalog the existing resources and guidance available to help students afford higher education – and to raise awareness of these resources so that the students who could benefit most take advantage of such opportunities.
- c. State leaders should implement programs designed to narrow equity gaps by improving student understanding of financial aid eligibility, such as completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, and how to access emergency aid for non-tuition expenses.
- d. Improve communications with families, including linguistically appropriate and culturally responsive communications, about the real out-of-pocket expenses of post-secondary education so that students can make informed decisions.

4. Study the implications of expanding eligibility for last-dollar state-funded scholarship programs, such as for non-traditional students, part-time students, and students at 4-year institutions, to advance equity goals.

- a. OPC should work with IHE leaders to explore if changes to the Promise Scholarship program could narrow equity gaps in higher education.
- b. Among the potential options to study could be converting the program to a first-dollar (as opposed to a last-dollar) structure and expanding the program's eligibility to cover four years of education at all public IHEs including books, food and transportation.

5. Concentrate on enrolling BIPOC, immigrant, low-income, youth in foster care, those formerly incarcerated, people with disabilities, and adults 25+ in workforce development programs that award postsecondary credentials, including Registered Apprenticeships.

- a. Ensure that information about workforce training reaches communities with the lowest attainment rates by partnering with key stakeholder organizations within those communities.
- b. K-12 leaders must be a part of these efforts to ensure that this communication allows students to be exposed to information about career pathways as early as middle school.
- c. Promote Registered Apprenticeship as an industry-aligned pathway for in-demand fields for students to earn a wage while earning a postsecondary credential.

RECOMMENDATION DETAILS: PROVIDING DIRECT SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

06. Advocate for additional resources—including the expansion of the RI Reconnect program—to expand on-campus wraparound supports, advising, and counseling to provide students with what they need to complete their program of study.

- a. Expanding the RI Reconnect program would benefit students whose needs are not met by existing programs at the state, federal and IHE levels.
- b. The higher education system needs to work with the human resources agencies to ensure they include student populations and understand their needs. By designing a direct line of communication from the IHEs to the agencies, policymakers can facilitate more comprehensive delivery of services.
- c. Simultaneously, IHEs should work to bolster on-campus student supports that provide the most relief for the majority of their students, such as childcare.
- d. State leaders should also work to explore sustainable funding source options for emergency grant aid programs that students can use for costs including housing, food, and medical expenses.

07. Develop a library of resources, constantly updated, accessible to students enrolled in or contemplating academic and workforce training programs so they can address barriers that might interfere with program completion.

- a. This collection should include information on programs that provide wraparound student supports (including state and federal public benefits programs) as well as instructions on how to contact a person who can help navigate the process of applying for support.
- b. Cataloging the existing resources will allow OPC and state leaders to identify gaps in the support structure – such as the need for more well-trained student affairs professionals who focus on workforce training – and target investments accordingly.

08. Invest in the people who help higher education students navigate the process of receiving support by providing them with meaningful professional development as well as access to comprehensive information.

- a. In partnership with IHE leaders, faculty, and staff, OPC should identify strategies that can be used to provide support to student affairs professionals – including hiring more staff to decrease the workload of individuals, offering training on working with different groups of students, and developing partnerships with mental health providers.
- b. Compiling information and regularly updating this information about wraparound services and social safety net programs into a single resource would allow the people who work with students to give clearer guidance on the range of options available for each person's situation.
- c. Over the long term, OPC should work with other state leaders to simplify and reform the process for enrolling in higher education and navigating the different systems of benefits available to postsecondary students.

RECOMMENDATION DETAILS: REMOVING STRUCTURAL POLICY BARRIERS

09. Advocate for predictable funding for Rhode Island’s postsecondary system, including public and private institutions, that requires a state investment comparable to the rest of New England.

- a. On the nationwide ranking of states that provide the most higher education funding per student, Rhode Island ranks 42nd of 50.
- b. To accomplish all of the recommendations in this report, it will be necessary to have a level of investment at the state level that provides the resources to increase attainment and advance equity goals.

10. Develop a more robust longitudinal data system that aligns data from OPC, RIDE, DLT, DCYF and IHEs.

- a. A linked data system that includes information on career pathways and student outcomes would give prospective students a better picture of what educational and employment options are possible, and thus allow them to make more informed decisions.
- b. A lack of standardized data reporting in the state higher education system makes it difficult for policymakers to analyze across the education continuum to compare information, understand the ROI of state investment, have quick responses to data questions to inform state policies and be able to forecast the skills of the talent pool.
- c. By investing in improving the state’s longitudinal data system, state agencies can garner information about student outcome data associated with certain credential programs to advise students on completions and job prospects.

11. Correct systemic issues preventing the conversion of prior learning experiences and course completions toward degree and credential programs.

- a. OPC should develop statewide guidance for IHEs on how life experiences, including the completion of non-credit-bearing programs, can be counted as credit toward coursework that confers particular sets of skills.
- b. State leaders should work with IHEs to expand existing policies that articulate the value of credits for learning that may not have taken place on their campuses.
- c. OPC should also support efforts by IHE leaders to review their noncredit programming and assign credit in alignment with revised statewide policy.

12. Work with K-12 leaders to increase resources and support shown to improve the transition between high school and postsecondary settings to ensure all students are prepared for the rigor and experience.

- a. OPC can provide information that K-12 partners can use to give middle and high school students early exposure to the college-going process—as well as information on potential career pathway options.
- b. OPC should work with RIDE and other K-12 leaders to align high school graduation requirements with postsecondary admission requirements.

13. Assess the needs of regional employers and implement workforce training programs statewide that will provide qualified, credentialed workers that articulate to credit at the state’s IHEs.

- a. OPC should work with a variety of state, education, and business leaders to develop a set of recommendations that would ensure that both workforce training and degree programs are making frequent adjustments to their curricula that reflect current economic needs.

APPENDIX: WHEN WE MET – THREE SESSIONS, THREE DAYS

Committee members came together for three meetings in August, September, and October 2021 to discuss the following themes and topics:

Meeting One: Creating a More Prosperous Economy in Rhode Island

To grow the Rhode Island economy, state leaders set an ambitious goal for 70% of all working-age adults to attain a postsecondary credential by 2025. Research shows that the knowledge and skills of workers available in a labor force affect business and economic growth. Additionally, those with degrees and credentials command higher wages and earn more over their lifetimes. Increasing access to postsecondary education and career training in ways that are more inclusive and equitable is essential to creating a more prosperous Rhode Island economy.

- Increasing Access and Participation in Workforce Development Opportunities, with an Emphasis on State Priority Sectors
- Credential Pathways: Providing Building Blocks to a More Educated Rhode Island

Meeting Two: Equity in Enrollment, Persistence, and Affordability

Research shows that completing a postsecondary credential improves lifetime earnings, creates stronger community engagement, and leads to greater personal growth and fulfillment. Higher education leaders and policymakers must work to ensure that all Rhode Islanders have the opportunities and support that they need to share in the prosperity that higher education has to offer. While Rhode Island has committed to raising attainment rates to 70% by 2025, attainment gaps still exist for Black, Latinx, Native American, and some communities of Asian students. Further, more work is needed to fill the financial void that has arisen for middle- and low-income individuals who do not qualify for Pell grants, adult learners, and under-resourced communities. Closing equity gaps and providing financial support are ways to increase attendance and persistence for all students.

- Closing Equity Gaps in Rhode Island's Postsecondary Education System
- Affordability and its Role in Equity

Meeting Three: Understanding the Needs of Today's Postsecondary Students

In 2021, only 25 percent of students who enroll in postsecondary education across the United States are ages 18-24 and directly enroll after high school graduation. Most postsecondary students are parents, employees, caregivers, and students who have been previously enrolled but paused their education or transferred schools. These changing enrollment demographics highlight the evolving and wide-ranging supports that students need. Wraparound student services including tutoring, counseling, childcare services, transportation, and other non-instructional supports help students persist to postsecondary completion. Discussions at this meeting centered around how the population of postsecondary students has changed, what the various pathways to postsecondary degrees or credentials are, and how Rhode Island can better support all students.

- Who Are Today's Students and How Can We Better Support Their Needs?
- Charting a Path Forward for Rhode Island Postsecondary Education

At each meeting, committee members heard framing presentations from subject matter experts who provided background information on both the national and Rhode Island context for each discussion. The following speakers gave framing presentations:

- **Amy Grzybowski**, Executive Director, Rhode Island Higher Education & Industry Centers, OPC
- **Angie Escalante**, Community College of Rhode Island, Class of 2020; Johnson and Wales University, Class of 2023
- **Anthony P. Carnevale**, Director, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce
- **Funke Dina**, Rhode Island College, Class of 2023
- **James Mikolowsky**, Director of Higher Education, The Hunt Institute
- **Jenifer R. Giroux**, Associate Vice President, Professional Studies and Continuing Education, Rhode Island College
- **Jimmieka Mills**, Communications Consultant, Lumina Foundation
- **Marie Bernardo-Souza**, President, Johnson and Wales University
- **Patrick Condon**, Process Technology Program graduate
- **Sarah Blusiewicz**, Assistant Director of Workforce Development Services at Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training
- **Scott Jenkins**, Strategy Director for State Policy, Lumina Foundation
- **Stephanie Leigh Nelson**, University of Rhode Island, Class of 2021
- **Sylvia Spears**, Vice President for Administration & Innovation, College Unbound
- **Tammy Vargas Warner**, Assistant Commissioner of Postsecondary Academic and Student Affairs, OPC
- **Tekla E. Moquin**, Executive Director, Division of Workforce Partnerships, CCRI

After the framing presentations, committee members held in-depth discussions and identified recommendations that they believe Commissioner Gilkey and the OPC staff should prioritize. The final recommendations reflect the consensus of all committee members, who had multiple opportunities to provide feedback.

In addition to the committee members, a special thanks to the following community members for the time, attendance, and participation in these meetings:

- **Corey Jones**, Policy Advisor, Office of Rhode Island Governor Daniel J. McKee
- **Dean Libutti**, Associate Vice President for Enrollment Management & Student Success, University of Rhode Island
- **Edwin Pacheco**, Interim Executive Director External Affairs and Communications, Rhode Island College
- **Elizabeth Texeria**, Director of the Office of College and Career Readiness, Rhode Island Department of Education
- **Kyle Bennett**, Director, Policy and Equity, United Way of Rhode Island
- **Nora Crowley**, Senate Policy Director, Rhode Island Senate
- **Robert Millerick**, Deputy Director of Policy, Rhode Island House of Representatives
- **Rosemary Costigan**, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Community College of Rhode Island
- **Roshni Darnal**, Director, C community Investments, United Way of Rhode Island
- **Stephen Osborn**, State Strategy and Student Opportunity Officer, Rhode Island Department of Education

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