

SAILING AHEAD

STRATEGIC PLAN FOR
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION
(2015-2020)

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INTRODUCTION

Hope is the Rhode Island state motto, and there are many reasons to be optimistic about public postsecondary education in Rhode Island.

Strong momentum exists at the state level from the legislature and the governor, at the campus level from our three institutions of higher learning, and at the community level from students, parents, and employers. Increased state funding for our colleges and university, establishing the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, and creating the Council on Postsecondary Education of the Board of Education demonstrate Rhode Island's commitment to better align public higher education with the educational and economic needs of the state.

As many other states have come to realize, transforming postsecondary education requires more than small improvements or pilot programs. This is a time for bold, strategic, and systemic change. This five-year plan charts a course toward a system of higher education where Rhode Islanders have access to high-quality public education that they can afford, where they have the supports they need to succeed, and where they graduate with the skills employers want in today's complex and changing economy.

WHERE WE ARE

Budget instability as a result of the recent recession and rising student debt has significantly impacted public higher education in states across the nation, including Rhode Island. Historical data on funding levels reveal that state support for higher education institutions has declined steadily and precipitously since 1980. Figures show that Rhode Island is funding the public colleges and university at levels below its support for them in 1963, ranking 42nd nationally in its support for higher education.¹ These figures are improving thanks to Governor Raimondo's and the General Assembly's support for higher education in the state budget.

At the same time, the costs of higher education have continued to rise, and students are expected to bear an ever greater share. Currently, Rhode Island students and families pay 70.1% of the costs of public higher education (much higher than the national average of 47.1% and 5th highest nationwide).² These increasing costs limit access to postsecondary training and education, especially for underserved and underrepresented populations. Flagship institutions like the University of Rhode Island have responded by increasing institutional resources dedicated to financial aid, but they have a limited ability to expand aid further to keep up with student needs.

Financial considerations are not the only challenge for students seeking a postsecondary credential. Many students lack the necessary social and institutional support structures to help them complete their programs of study. Other students struggle with competing priorities, such as having to work or care for loved ones, while others lack a clear vision of how their studies advance their goals. In Rhode Island, populations of color face particular challenges, with attainment rates 26% lower on average than whites.³

And yet, earning a postsecondary credential is more important than ever. Estimates suggest that by 2020, 71% of Rhode Island jobs will require an industry certificate or college degree.⁴ Currently, only 60% of Rhode Islanders have the necessary qualifications. This difference points to a “skills gap” between the training employers require and the preparation of our workforce. Insufficient support for human capital development and university research has contributed to the current inability of our state to transform itself from a primarily low-skilled, industrial based economy to a more sustainable, diversified modern economy.

Other states are moving aggressively to address these challenges by expanding college access, raising completion rates, aligning degree and certificate programs with the needs of employers, and strengthening institutional capacity.

WHERE WE'RE HEADED

In order to become more competitive and build greater prosperity, the Ocean State needs a coordinated, comprehensive system of public higher education that is responsive to the state's economic and demographic changes. This strategic plan provides a framework for change and charts a clear course ahead. It includes values that will inform the next five years of work, as well as priorities for action. Implementing this plan will require input and effort from key stakeholders: the Council of Postsecondary Education, Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, the three public institutions of higher learning (University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, and the Community College of Rhode Island), and the RI Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, as well as students, families, faculty, business and political leaders, and community members.

VALUES

Our values inform both the overarching goals for our system of higher education and the processes for achieving those goals.

EXCELLENCE

Excellence is the cornerstone of higher education. Students must gain the knowledge and skills to excel in their lives and work, and faculty must continue to excel in pedagogy and research so that they can be the knowledge drivers of our state. Other goals should not compromise excellence in academic standards.

EQUITY

Equity focuses on eliminating disparities around higher education access, affordability, and attainment. This is especially important for underserved and underrepresented populations, whose opportunities have historically been limited by factors including race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and family educational background.

INVESTMENT

Investment means committing financial, institutional, and community resources to transforming our public system of higher education so that it becomes a more accessible and affordable pathway for our citizens and greater economic driver for our state.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnership requires coordinated and collaborative efforts by all stakeholders to improve higher education in Rhode Island.

INNOVATION

Innovation drives creative new programs and products, fuels business and industry, and leads the way to new solutions for society's most pressing issues.

IMPACT

Impact describes the purpose behind the endeavors undertaken in higher education. Individual and collective contributions, such as teaching, learning, research, and service, promote the greater good at the local, national, and global levels.

PRIORITIES

The following four priorities offer a framework for setting goals, initiating policies and programs, and measuring success in public higher education in Rhode Island over the next five years (2015-2020).

HIGHER ATTAINMENT
OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCESS AND AFFORD COLLEGE
PROSPEROUS ECONOMY
EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

HIGHER ATTAINMENT

Completing a postsecondary credential brings opportunities for improved quality of life, higher lifetime earnings, stronger community engagement, and greater personal growth and fulfillment. Rhode Island has committed to the goal of improving statewide attainment to 60% by 2025,⁵ and it is important to meet this ambitious goal without compromising our commitment to excellence. According to data recently published by the Lumina Foundation, 44% of the state's working-age adults (25-64) have an associate degree or higher.⁶ This figure is significantly lower for populations of color. Among the black population, attainment is just over 30%, while among the Latino population the rate is even lower at 18%. There is no time to lose in addressing these disparities and improving our overall attainment rate.

TARGETS BY 2020

- 51.9% statewide postsecondary attainment⁷
- 45,125 more degree holders ages 25-64 = 1814 additional new grads per year
- 50% increase in attainment among Latino and black populations

STRATEGIES

1. Support institutions in developing measures to evaluate persistence and attainment as part of performance-funding formula.
2. Support institutions to improve rates of persistence and attainment, especially for traditionally underserved and underrepresented populations.
 - a) Partner with institutions to expand college completion programs to re-engage Rhode Islanders with some college credits and help them progress to completion.
 - b) Partner with institutions to improve curriculum alignment and develop a general education core.
 - c) Identify and implement best practices for reducing excess credits.
 - d) Identify and implement best practices for promoting student resilience and engagement.
3. Support institutions in implementing components of the Complete College Rhode Island plan.
 - a) Support institutions in implementing interventions to accelerate time to degree.
 - b) Support institutions in establishing or expanding guided pathways.
 - c) Support institutions in implementing or expanding structured schedules and/or learning communities.

OPPORTUNITIES TO ACCESS AND AFFORD COLLEGE

Historical data on funding levels highlight the critical need for calculated, deliberate investments in higher education that ensure a postsecondary credential is attainable and affordable for all Rhode Islanders.

Research by Ruffalo Noel Levitz points to two affordability thresholds that make a difference for students' enrollment, persistence, and completion: (1) having tuition, fees, and books covered; and (2) having 70% of total cost of attendance met.⁸ Getting as many students as possible to these thresholds will make a significant positive impact on attainment in Rhode Island.

TARGETS BY 2020

- 100% of low-income⁹ in-state students covered for cost of tuition, fees, and books at RI public institutions through grants, scholarships, and federal need-based student loans
- 33% of low-income in-state students covered for 70% of the total of cost attendance (tuition/books/fees/room/board) at RI public institutions through grants, scholarships, and federal need-based student loans
- 33% reduction in average debt of graduates from public institutions

STRATEGIES

1. Implement last-dollar scholarship program to get more students across affordability thresholds.
2. Identify and add alternative revenue streams for need-based and merit-based financial aid.
 - a) Advocate for increase in state funding for need-based financial aid for resident students.
 - b) Secure available private and federal funding that can support student financial aid.
 - c) Develop community-based sponsorships of resident students.
3. Incentivize institutions to reduce dependency on in-state student tuition funds, as compared with other funding sources.
4. Encourage institutions to increase need-based and merit-based financial aid.
5. Advocate for expanding student loan forgiveness programs.
6. Coordinate with Treasurer's office to expand utilization of state 529 plan.
7. Coordinate with other state offices and agencies to expand utilization of higher education tax incentives.

PROSPEROUS ECONOMY

The national and Rhode Island economy has changed significantly over the last generation as a result of technological advances and the globalization of markets and the workforce. Research shows that certain factors promote prosperity within this new economic landscape: (1) density of skilled workers; (2) access to good schools, colleges, universities, and health care; and (3) community leadership. Research also suggests that local economies, rather than global, national, or even regional economies, will drive overall growth. To attract new business investment and build a thriving economy, Rhode Island must commit to retaining its graduates and building communities with a greater density of educated citizens.

TARGETS BY 2020

- 20% increase in total # new graduates from URI, RIC, and CCRI in high-demand, high-wage areas
- 10% increase in # recent graduates from URI, RIC, and CCRI entering state and national workforce
- Increase in economic impact of postsecondary education for Rhode Island's businesses and communities

STRATEGIES

1. Coordinate with the Department of Labor and Training and the Governor's Workforce Board to map the alignment of academic and vocational offerings with current and projected workforce needs for the state.
2. Increase number of graduates with skills necessary for high-demand, high-wage fields.
 - a) Partner with institutions to expand capacity in current programs that prepare students for high-demand, high-wage fields.
 - b) Partner with institutions to develop new programs of study that meet identified needs in high-demand, high-wage fields.
 - c) Partner with institutions to develop stackable credentials in key fields to promote education and skills training at all levels of the workforce and encourage progress in moving up career ladders.
3. Ensure that all students are prepared to enter workforce immediately after graduation.
 - a) Partner with institutions to conduct learning outcomes assessments that demonstrate how curriculum advances 21st-century skills, such as critical thinking, analysis, application, and communication.
 - b) Partner with institutions to expand experiential learning opportunities in coordination with businesses and communities, including project-based learning, internships, co-ops, and volunteer programs.
 - c) Partner with institutions to incorporate soft-skills training into their curriculum and extracurricular activities.
 - d) Partner with institutions to develop more robust career advising that engages the business community.
4. Partner with institutions to increase economic impact of business partnerships and research, especially at the local and state levels.

EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONS

In order to ensure a strong and equitable community, Rhode Island must invest in higher education as a top priority. Struggling against decades of budget cutbacks, our institutions lack the funding needed to fulfill their mission, support our students, and drive their research initiatives. Rhode Island must commit itself to increasing funding for public higher education. This will be especially important as the system of higher education must increase its capacity to meet the ambitious goal of 60% attainment by 2025. At the same time, our institutions of higher learning must maximize the resources available to them and attract new revenue from federal and private sources. Moreover, we must develop a greater capacity to collect, analyze, and report system-wide data to inform decision making, monitor institutional effectiveness, improve accountability and transparency, and promote student success. This necessitates investing in a system to maintain and analyze comprehensive data on our institutions, facilities, students, and graduates.

TARGETS BY 2020

- Diversification of revenue streams for higher education
- Restoration of state support to pre-recession ratios
- Increase in operational efficiencies
- Comprehensive data management system implemented

STRATEGIES

1. Identify and secure additional revenue streams for postsecondary education.
 - a) Advocate for more state funding for postsecondary education.
 - b) Apply for and secure federal and private grant monies to support institutional capacity and research.
2. Establish and monitor performance-funding measures for each institution.
3. Coordinate with institutions to ensure they have sufficient capacity to meet goals for student attainment.
4. Streamline operations to reduce costs throughout system.
 - a) Absorb the functions, duties, and responsibilities of the RI Higher Education Assistance Authority (RIHEAA) within the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (OPC).
 - b) Review institutional operations to ensure efficient utilization and coordination of assets.
 - c) Encourage institutions to maximize use of classroom space.
 - d) Review capital improvement plans submitted by institutions to eliminate inefficiencies.
 - e) Join NC-SARA consortium to streamline costs for engaging in distance learning initiatives.
5. Demonstrate progress toward achieving system-wide targets and objectives.
 - a) Expand internal capacity to collect and analyze system-wide data.
 - b) Develop processes for publishing system-wide data to improve accountability and transparency.
 - c) Conduct studies comparing RI postsecondary data with peer systems to identify strengths and challenges of system.

SAILING AHEAD

At the end of WWII, the US made a bold decision to invest in the future of its economy by providing \$1.9 billion annually to the education of veterans. This commitment to human capital gave people hope for personal and collective prosperity and enabled the WWII generation to become the “greatest generation.”

It is possible that Rhode Island’s next greatest generation is waiting for the opportunity to propel RI forward. Let us harness the winds of change and sail forth with the goal of greater prosperity for our students and communities.

ENDNOTES

1. See Postsecondary Education Opportunity, “State Investment and Disinvestment in Higher Education, FY 1961 to FY 2014” (Issue 260, February 2014).
2. See State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, “State Higher Education Finance (SHEF): FY 2014” (2015), Figure 9, p. 33: <http://www.sheeo.org/sites/default/files/project-files/SHEF%20FY%202014-20150410.pdf>.
3. Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner calculations based on US census figures and Rhode Island data in Lumina Foundation, “A Stronger Nation through Higher Education” (2015): <http://strongernation.luminafoundation.org/report/#rhode-island>.
4. See Georgetown University, Center on Education and the Workforce, “Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020” (2013), Figure 6, p. 8: https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/StateProjections_6.1.15_agc_v2.pdf.
5. Postsecondary attainment includes an associate degree or higher.
6. See [Rhode Island data](#) in the Lumina Foundation’s “Stronger Nation” Report (2015) above at n. 3. The report includes state-by-state progress toward the goal of 60% attainment by 2025.
7. Following the Lumina “Stronger Nation” Report (2015), postsecondary attainment figures include adults of working-age (25-64) with a two-year or four-year college degree.
8. Measures adapted from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, “Access Alert: How the Neediest Students Can Gain Access and Succeed through Strategic Financial Aid Awarding” (2007): https://www.ruffalonl.com/documents/shared/Papers_and_Research/2007/ACCESSreport_1007.pdf.
9. “Low-income” is understood as any student who is eligible for a federal Pell grant.

