The advisory committee meeting began at 9 AM with welcome remarks from Committee Co-Chair, Beverly Ledbetter, Esq. Chair of the Board of Directors for the Rhode Island Urban League; Former Vice President and General Counsel, Brown University.

Chair Ledbetter shared that the day’s focus was to do a deep dive into looking at the postsecondary education system through an equity lens. She stated that research shows that completing some form of postsecondary credentialing improves lifetime earnings, creates stronger community engagement, and leads to greater personal growth and fulfillment. While Rhode Island has committed to raising attainment rates to 70% by 2025, attainment gaps still exist for Black and Latinx students. Further, more work is needed to fill the financial void that has arisen for middle/low-income individuals that do not qualify for Pell grants, adult learners, and Black and Latinx students. Supporting students through college in high school programs (a term that encompasses dual credit and dual enrollment) and providing financial support to students who need it are ways to increase attendance and persistence.

Chair Ledbetter then asked all attendees to introduce themselves then Chair Ledbetter provided a brief recap of the first meeting.

The first meeting focused on the economic and workforce trends, as well as the need to think about pathways for credentialing. Dr. Anthony P. Carnevale, Director and Research Professor from Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, gave the keynote and gave this group a call to action around the need for postsecondary education as critical for Rhode Island.

In the morning session, there was a focus on increasing access and participation in workforce development opportunities, with an emphasis on the state’s priority sectors. From the presentation, small groups and then the whole group discussed, and four (4) key themes emerged:

1. Strengthen alignment between workforce development opportunities and the current needs of regional employers.
2. Give students exposure to workforce training opportunities earlier in the education continuum so that they can understand all the possible postsecondary education pathways.
3. Ensure that the holistic needs of students who participate in workforce development programs, especially adult students, are being met through wraparound student services.
4. Inform students about the resources and opportunities that are available throughout the state to support their successful completion of workforce development opportunities.

In the afternoon, there was a focus on Credential pathways, as a way to educate more Rhode Islanders. The four (4) key takeaways from that were:

1. Establish a framework that allows prior learning experiences and non-credit-bearing courses to be converted to credits that count towards a degree or certificate.
2. Provide transparent information on how a “credential of value” is defined and which perspectives are incorporated into such decisions.
3. Educate the public on credential pathways and keep students connected to the higher education system so they will have opportunities for upskilling.
4. Prioritize the development of a robust longitudinal data system to support students throughout their entire educational journey.

At 9:30 AM Dr. Sylvia Spears, Vice President for Administration and Innovation, College Unbound presented on the topic: What is Equity in Enrollment, Persistence, and Affordability

Dr. Spears began by stating that the work the committee is doing is some of the most important work that we can do in a community, state, and country. She shared her background and that her father is Native American with a GED, and her mother is a Black woman from the south. She attended Rhode Island College and left after two years to attend Virginia State, an HBCU. She stated that education was always part of what was emphasized in my house and that the degree is important and there is so much more learning that happens outside of the classroom. She made it her mission to make education across the whole spectrum to be more inclusive and responsive to students of all backgrounds.

Dr. Spears shared that the data of the Narragansett tribe showed that less than 0.4% of students had a postsecondary degree. She thought someone needed to be a runner between communities of color, between communities of non-English speakers, between communities that are not usually included, and the educational spaces. Dr. Spears shared from her dissertation “Freedom’s Children”, that in her parent-teacher meeting, her second-grade teacher told her mother, “your daughter is bright, but she’s really lazy.” She said she wasn’t lazy; she was scared to death of her. In her 40s, she told my dissertation committee, “I am saying to my second-grade teacher, ‘Do you think I am lazy now?’” Her mother had the cultural capital to walk to the principal’s office and ask for a change in classrooms.

Dr. Spears stated that the work to create real and substantive change is based on the premise that diversity education is radical. It also means we must look across systems: pre-K to K-12 to higher education. Educational equity, as a body of work, requires us to pull from the roots, it means to be radical and pull from the roots. Therefore, you must look at the roots of injustices in
our systems. Higher Education in its earliest beginnings was designed for the sons, not the daughters, gender-fluid, or trans-folks, of the wealthy, not middle-class, white, not black and brown folks, landowners. What was built into the structure of early higher education still exists. It is in the air and it is in the foundation.

Talented people of all ages do not have access to postsecondary education, or they access and stop or drop out. They feel that they have been pushed to the margins, the margins that are pushed so hard to change. What does it mean to have members of our community go to the places we told them they could come to get a leg up and would help them achieve, then go on to fail them in their pursuits? In the cases of success, students leave thinking they achieved despite the system, not because of it - despite the hard work we are doing. We have to make sure that we are not building a kinder, more friendly type of oppression. We have to get to the root of these systems.

Dr. Spears stated that diversity would ask us who is in the room? Who has access to postsecondary education and what is the nature of that access? Equity would ask us who is trying to access postsecondary education but can’t? Inclusion would ask have everyone’s ideas been heard? Justice would ask whose ideas and voice would not be taken seriously due to their identity?

Diversity prioritizes an increase in numbers. That is important, but not sufficient. Inclusion focuses on the conditions of their participation. That is important, but not sufficient. Justice requires us to come to terms with what happens in our spaces and how it connects with what happens in the world.

Reforms tinker around the edges of what already exists. History shows us that what we are doing is not enough to achieve new outcomes. This work can’t occur in substantive ways by relying on people’s hearts. It has to be an effort that has an impact. She concluded by quoting Margaret Meade “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has”.

At 10 AM Scott Jenkins, Strategy Director for State Policy, Lumina Foundation gave a presentation on the Current State of Equity in Postsecondary Education Across the USA.

He stated that Rhode Island’s attainment rate has increased by 10.3 percent since 2009 to 52.9 percent in 2019, but the current attainment level is still below the state’s goal of 70 percent by 2025.

The current data shows that policymakers have major opportunities to advance attainment while narrowing equity gaps, especially with Black and Hispanic students, who face the largest gaps in attainment rates – 21.2 % for Hispanic students and 33.1 % for Black students compared to 49.9 % for White students and 59.4% for Asian and Pacific Islander students.
He shared that another area of opportunity centers around Rhode Islanders who have some college but no credentials. 11% of state residents fall under this category. If policymakers and higher education leaders can create structures that allow these individuals to leverage their previous education, they may be able to attain credentials in a shorter period of time.

Postsecondary education provides significant economic benefits to students, their families, their communities, and the nation. Education can be an engine for intergenerational mobility, but these effects have often not been realized by Black and Hispanic students. The failure to close attainment equity gaps by race/ethnicity and income costs the U.S. economy nearly one trillion dollars each year. People seeking services are not the problem, the system is the problem.

Lumina’s 2021-2025 State Policy Agenda is focused on: Funding Formulas, Financial Aid, and Inclusive Pathways for Adults. He closed by quoting William Wilberforce: “You can choose to look the other way but never again can you say that you never knew”.

At 10:30 AM the group went into breakout sessions to discuss the topic: Closing Equity Gaps in Rhode Island’s Postsecondary Education System. The guiding questions they were charged with discussing and reporting back were:

- Which existing policy initiatives have allowed Rhode Island to make progress on narrowing higher education equity gaps? What were the features that enabled these initiatives to be successful?
- How can state leaders in Rhode Island target support in ways that direct resources and guidance toward the higher education students with the greatest needs?
- What actions can IHE leaders in this room take to close equity gaps on their campuses? Industry leaders? Elected officials?

From 11 AM – 12 PM, the group came back together and shared out and had a group discussion. The following were the key findings by group:

**Group 1:** What works with the charter school and public school model; K12 free breakfasts and lunches, making it free for all students; CTE schools - what works?

**Group 2:** Gaps that are needed - Higher education, K12, GA members - investment in students while in K12 and how there are gaps in the higher education space; Seamless transition from K12 to college (through policies); Raising the bar for students to be successful in postsecondary education; Postsecondary education should be free (like K12) and then give additional support based on need; RI Promise - thinking about ways to reconsider the policy to achieve what we want.

**Group 3:** FAFSA completion - systematic perspective has been a success from a last-dollar perspective (especially through awareness); Different ways to automate the process to improve completion; Apprenticeship programs; Criminal justice reform (second chance Pell); Dual enrollment and early college - does a good job of demystifying college and the full experience; CTE programs - engagement needs to occur earlier when possible; RI Promise - validating intentional credentials and better use of data; If people don’t know about it or believe it, then
they aren’t going to use it.

**Group 4:** Success of the Promise and what it would look like expanded; More emphasis on wraparound services; Student success focus for performance-based funding; Engagement with disengaged people.

**Group 5:** Promise program - last dollar funding but students often have to work which acts as a barrier; Works really well for undocumented students because they are not Pell-eligible; Follow up with students who drop out of school for re-engagement; RI has significantly underinvested higher education in comparison to other states; Governing structure change exacerbating funding issues

**Group 6:** Access to affordability. RI Promise is the start but where can we go now? Multiple paths to serve adult learners; We need to use data to inform policy

During the full group discussion, a theme that emerged was “persistence”. Once we get them to the table, how do we keep them there to be successful? There is a real importance of centering student voices in the education system and recognizing that college is not attainable or desired by all students. There needs to be a better job of supporting students through the various pathways and FAFSA can sometimes act as a barrier to attending school.

The point of higher education is to learn and experience, but also to gain employment. We need to make sure students know their pathways (especially when thinking about formerly incarcerated students). We should start with the populations we want to serve the most, then prioritize their needs. We need to make intentional cultural competency learning experiences for folks who work in these spaces. Of course, we want to improve the diversity of faculty and staff, but in the meantime, this is an investment that students need to feel supported. We need to stress more that students should go to college because postsecondary education is the economic ticket.

Everyone should be on a pathway to a four-year degree, however, it may start with an apprenticeship, a short-term credential, or a community college experience. Americans need an opt-out program - they can stop after achieving a short-term credential or an apprenticeship, but the system is created to be seamless to four-year degrees. There also need to be linkages between workforce and postsecondary to ensure that people get wages during their educational experiences rather than at the end. There must be wraparound services before and during postsecondary education.

At 12:45 PM the afternoon session began with a presentation on What is Affordability and National Trends in Postsecondary Affordability by James Mikolowsky, the Director of Higher Education at the Hunt Institute, and Dr. Winn Decker, Senior Policy Analyst on the Higher Education Team at the Hunt Institute.

The first key point made was that affordability in higher education refers to the ability of students (and their families) to pay all of the costs associated with being a postsecondary student. When it comes to the cost of college, many people think of the so-called “sticker price” which
refers to the total amount of tuition and fees that an institution charges. However, many higher education students face additional costs such as housing, food, transportation, child care, and other expenses. Students may also be eligible for a variety of financial aid support at the federal, state, and institution levels, but students do not know of their eligibility until they complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form, which can be a burden. Given the complex system of costs and financial aid, it can be very difficult for postsecondary students to accurately predict the out-of-pocket cost they will pay to access higher education.

The second key point was that state investment in public higher education plays a key role in postsecondary affordability. Rhode Island’s investment in public higher education dropped after the 2008 economic recession and has only recently surpassed the 2008 level. It is important to note that overall spending on public higher education in Rhode Island remains low compared to the rest of the country. The state ranks 42nd on the list of postsecondary expenditures per student. Recent modest increases in state investment have not kept pace with the rising cost of the net tuition costs faced by students in Rhode Island, which have risen by 37 percent since 2008.

The third key point was that student loan debt is a lasting consequence of challenges related to postsecondary affordability, and is a major concern for graduates in Rhode Island. Student loan debt is one of the fastest-growing forms of consumer debt, having grown by over 500 percent since 2003. When looking at graduates of all four-year institutions in Rhode Island, a study from The Institute for College Access and Success found that 59 percent of graduates in the state carry debt and the average debt burden is just over $37,600. This is the fourth highest student debt burden in the country.

At 1:00 PM the committee members went into a breakout session to discuss specific strategies that can be used to expand access and strengthen postsecondary affordability. At the end of the breakout session, each group shared out two to three policy priorities. The guiding questions they were charged with discussing and reporting back were:

- Why is the predictability of cost such an important factor for prospective students? What can Rhode Island do to improve the predictability of cost for postsecondary education?
- How can Rhode Island decrease the financial burden students currently face to pursue postsecondary education? What is the role of the state to increase affordability? OPC? Institutions?
- What current programs and initiatives in Rhode Island could be expanded or replicated to further improve the affordability of higher education?

From 1:30 PM– 2:00 PM, the group came back together and shared out and had a group discussion. The following were the key findings by group:

**Group 1:** Predictability of cost - unplanned expenses cause stopping and dropping out; The value proposition to higher education has gone down, The role that Promise plays in opening doors for students but what are the unintended consequences; High school graduation requirements - do we require FAFSA completion? Thoughtful policy is needed.
Group 2: CCRI about 80% of the cost is the staff - budgets are sometimes created in a vacuum; General assembly to create a multi-year budget, but if not then to create an increase that is predicted based on the cost of living and staffing; Front end of the system is easy to navigate because of state agency partnerships.

Group 3: Affordability and its role in equity for students; the power of knowledge to know where the resources are; Health insurance requirement for some campuses - that could be enough of a barrier to attending; Institutions join forces to make things more consistent and stable; Help students who leave money on the table to better communication; Institutions of higher education doing more to decrease costs.

Group 4: Connection of benefit; Student financial aid offices to student financial aid and benefits office to make connections to other benefits offered across the institution; Communication with families; Equity focused lending (for example low-interest loans for first-gen or high-demand programs); FAFSA Completion - financial literacy is a requirement for HS graduation, so FAFSA should be taught during that course; Prior learning assessments to decrease financial risk; Measure and track outcomes so general assembly can see ROI.

Group 5: Predictable state investment to help institutions expect future budgets; CCAP for parents in college; Dual enrollment/early college to cut the time down to graduation.

Group 6: Social economics - talking about the cost of attendance outside of tuition and fees; Students barriers to graduation are often related to life, not the education system (for example childcare); Importance for employers and educators to come to a table to come to an understanding to agree on a few things; Credit for skills (particularly for adult learners); Student enrolling today should understand their tuition and fees for the following years; Expanding financial support to include four-year institutions to map out the ROI; 7 out of 10 jobs require some kind of college credit.

During the full group discussion, it was stated that last year, about $6 million in financial aid was left on the table. The question was raised: How to braid public dollars - it is the government’s job to do that for students? There is a lot of data in our systems that are in silos. This requires an investment so any agency can access data on a student to ensure they get adequate resources. Looking at the non-profit sector for some best practices in success around things like college preparation and FAFSA would be beneficial. Stakeholders must include the non-profit and private sectors.

Concurrent enrollment: concerning levels of inequities in the current participation, as there are predominantly white and high SES students participating. Policies and initiatives are based on worthiness. We have a fear of people taking advantage of the services, but we discourage folks from gaining access. Too many programs we know work that aren’t in institutions that should be (especially in improving racial and ethnic outcomes). Governance in RI has shifted dramatically over the past decade and that impacts the system. If we continue to ignore the root problem, we can’t solve it.
September 24, 2021

At 2:45 PM Commissioner Shannon Gilkey provided closing remarks.

The 3rd meeting of the Advisory Council will be held on Friday, October 22, 2021, from 9 AM – 3 PM at the Rhode Island Nursing Education Center. The meeting adjourned at 3 PM.