Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner
Advisory Committee Meeting 3
Understanding the Needs of Today’s Postsecondary Student
October 22, 2021 9:00 AM
Rhode Island Nursing Education Center
350 Eddy Street Providence, RI 02903

MEETING MINUTES

The advisory committee meeting began at 9:00 AM with welcome remarks from Committee Co-Chair, Bob Weygand, who provided a recap last two meetings.

He shared that we took a bird’s eye view of the postsecondary population and created key points. Investing in wraparound services and making resources available, etc. are documented in the report we are putting together. The second meeting focused on affordability and accessibility - to create access to pathways of students’ choosing. He shared that there was discussion about addressing the equity gap in a timely manner, making it easier to transfer credits, rather than putting barriers and roadblocks, and about expanding RI Promise. Today’s meeting will include students sharing their experience.

He then called upon Assistant Commissioner, Dr. Tammy Vargas Warner. Dr. Warner shared her background as a first-generation of Domination descent who attended the Providence school system. She shared that she came from a low-income family and had limited choices for colleges. She became a mother during school, earned her Ph.D. in education, worked in business, and has come full circle to talk today about the students with whom she resembles.

She shared that of 100,000 students annually, 60% are female, they are more racially and ethnically diverse, Latinx has more than doubled and Black, and African American students have increased as well. There are still two groups of students - traditional students who enroll full-time, and nontraditional adults who enroll part-time. There are differences in the number of working hours nontraditional are working full-time, 70% of traditional students work at least some part-time hours. There is an increase in the number of students from low-income families and it is climbing significantly during the recession it will continue.

Today’s students are bringing more into the education settings including trauma they have faced and racial tensions that are seen nationally. This means we will see more students who need mental health support, help navigating responsibilities, who work while attending school to support themselves and their families. Dr. Warner shared that we must find ways to get to know them, to help them navigate barriers now and continue, to make a successful connection to career, change of careers, or moving up.
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At 9:45 AM a student roundtable discussion began with: Facilitator, Jimmieka Mills, Communications Consultant, Lumina Foundation; Angie Escalante, Community College of Rhode Island, Class of 2020; Johnson and Wales University, Class of 2023; Stephanie Leigh Nelson, University of Rhode Island, Class of 2020; Funke Dina, Rhode Island College, Class of 2024; and Patrick Condon, Community College of Rhode Island, Class of 2021.

The main takeaways from the student roundtable discussion were:

- Lack of campus support around childcare services
- The administrative burden of documentation being passed around
- For many immigrant students, they feel alone in the application process because their families can’t help without further translation and explanation
- URI Finish What You Started Program - pivotal in coming back to school
- The balance of working full-time and being in class full-time was difficult, ending in students stopping out
- Online coursework adds needed flexibility for adult learners - especially when 1:1 interaction with faculty is available
- For many immigrants, their education doesn’t transfer and they have to start over
- Childcare, and navigating the process, is a huge barrier to making it to class and staying engaged in postsecondary education
- RIC’s policies for childcare starts when kids are potty trained, but the kids that are younger than potty training are the ones that need support and programming so that parents can engage in postsecondary education
- Many individuals want to engage in postsecondary education but can’t because of the price and the lack of scholarships that exist for adult learners
- The ability to pay for bills, through scholarships or unemployment during the pandemic, resulted in the ability to prioritize school - ending in “A”s for the student’s classes
- Skills for RI Futures created programs to develop skills that could apply to many fields.
- What do you think is the biggest barrier in getting students to postsecondary education?
  - Lack of organization and meaningful guidance. This is both for high schoolers and adult learners.
  - The advisors we have in school that are supposed to help students navigate, profile students in a way that can discourage students from succeeding.
  - If you didn’t go to high school here, you can’t be a Promise student, so the main program that’s supposed to help is automatically inapplicable.

At 10:30 AM the Advisory committee members broke into small groups to discuss the various challenges today’s postsecondary students face. At the end of the breakout session, each group shared two to three policy priorities and actionable items.

The following were the key findings by groups:

**Group 1:** There is a need for Wraparound Services (WAS) but it is a financial challenge for IHE to provide the full scope; There should be one-stop shops for navigation; Mobile - mentor
Group 2: WAS – there is a need for initial mentoring to start correctly and take the right course; Assess life experience and knowledge they bring with them and give college credit because it is of value, but this takes resources; This is a tall order to do it well and affordably; It is important to start the conversation in time and use relief dollars.

Group 3: Complexification’s system, OPC mandate or create more coordination FAFSA; High school, gap urgency- corporate private state, childcare and education are intertwined - level incentives; Community violence intervention intersection with schools, identify susceptible and those who are involved; Communicate the same goal pipeline streets, school, IHE.

Group 4: Food, housing, and pathways to employment; United Way RI is important for collaboration around the existing system more in an efficient way for students; Equity in hiring the right person that will be on the front line to connect with students immediately is important for success; Rebuilding existing platforms rather than creating new ones, re-tool and re-calibrate. Equity- how do we treat each human being in our system with equity and value and see them and help them?

Group 5- Tammy- also WAS, and advising was critical, mentors, funding, and financial literacy for all. Act early on access for DOCA adults. Some of these will be necessary no matter what, but some are bandaids to get through the current system. How to evolve current IHE systems to better serve the students and the needs they have now.

Group 6- Paige- Postsecondary systems are not intuitive why are we asking the students to navigate- is not it the responsibility of the system itself, postsecondary system should be eliminating barriers to move to a better model. Earn while you learn, use the federal work-study program, the value of mentorships, current students as mentors for first-year students, and should be part of the curriculum to be a mentor. RI Promise is a great start but a small sliver, it does not include expenses or adult learners, kids need remediation if they should lose access.

Co-chair Beverly Ledbetter then stated that there is a need to unpack and compress to identify a few meaningful ideas to move forward on together. The goal is to translate priorities for the Commissioner to use to bring about change.

The committee members shared the following: IHEs should increase their ability to give credit for life experience; IHEs will need more funding to support student life – assuming a small amount of current budget- but will need OPC to do to scale and create systems. There is federal funding now, but in the future is 10% sustainable; A comprehensive system is critical and costly- we have a lot of data but it is hard to get but we need it to understand and change practices. Students today are moving in and out of the system in the journey. IHEs are designed for traditional college students - this is not the reality now and in the future; We need a user-centered design, OPC can see the whole landscape, who are the users, how to change to reflect them;
Co-Chair Ledbetter concluded by stating it was important to think about trends, needs, and priorities in terms of a recommendation for deliverables.

At 1:00 PM, Commissioner Shannon Gilkey presented the vision for carrying out the Advisory Committees’ work in a manner that advances the key strategic priorities for the state. Key Takeaways from Meeting 1 included:

- Strengthen alignment between workforce development opportunities and the current needs of regional employers.
- Give students exposure to workforce training opportunities earlier in the education continuum so that they can understand all the possible postsecondary education.
- Ensure that the holistic needs of students who participate in workforce development programs, especially adult students, are being met through wraparound student services.
- Inform students about the resources and opportunities that are available throughout the state to support their successful completion of workforce development opportunities.
- 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.
- Provide transparent information on how a “credential of value” is defined and which perspectives are incorporated into such decisions.
- Educate the public on credential pathways and keep students connected to the higher education system so they will have opportunities for upskilling.
- Prioritize the development of a robust longitudinal data system to support students throughout their entire educational journey.

The Key Takeaways from Meeting 2 included:

- The work to advance equity priorities in postsecondary education must begin before students arrive on higher education campuses.
- Students must be supported in the transition from high school to whichever postsecondary pathway best suits them.
- Equity must be an intentional focus of higher education leaders throughout all points of a student's postsecondary journey – not just in terms of access, but also as a part of efforts to ensure that students persist through their time in postsecondary education through completion.
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- The inability to accurately predict what higher education will cost is one of the biggest barriers students face when trying to decide if they should enroll in postsecondary education.

- Increasing completion rates of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form would serve as a pivotal step in moving students closer to enrolling in postsecondary education.

- Policymakers and higher education leaders should work to help students complete credentials in a timely manner.

- The Rhode Island Promise Scholarship has played an important role in removing affordability barriers for students, but there is more work still to be done to make the program more successful and inclusive.

At 2:45 PM there were closing remarks from the Co-Chairs and the Commissioner.

The meeting adjourned at 3 PM.