RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF THE POSTSECONDARY COMMISSIONER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING ONE: CREATING A MORE PROSPEROUS ECONOMY IN RHODE ISLAND

Thursday, August 26, 2021 | Rhode Island Nursing Education Center | Providence, Rhode Island

POSTSECONDARY PATHWAYS: PROVIDING BUILDING BLOCKS TO A MORE EDUCATED RHODE ISLAND

As the population of postsecondary education students continues to change, there is growing recognition of the value that different types of credentials provide for students.

> ***Credentials*** - a term used to encompass all documents or other records of achievement that demonstrate a person's qualifications for an occupation or task given their mastery of a subject, skill, or trade.

There are numerous credentials available to postsecondary students, but the most common include academic credentials such as associate and bachelor's degrees, as well as short-term industry credentials such as certificates, licenses and badges. These workforce training and short-term industry credentials help individuals quickly gain the knowledge and skills needed for employment or advancement; but they often come with one major caveat- they are not always credit bearing. Non-credit credentials, while beneficial in the short-term, often prevent students from progressing further in their educational journey. By promoting the use of stackable credentials, and creating non-credit to credit pathways, Rhode Island can ensure more people are able to obtain credentials that support their educational ambitions and career goals in both the short and long term.

STACKABLE CREDENTIALS

Stackable Credentials are one of the most common forms of credit-bearing short-term credentials, generally recognized as a credential that can be applied toward a higher-level certificate or degree, such as an associate degree. These credentials build, or stack, upon one another, which allow students to use prior knowledge and continue their education at their own pace. The U.S. Department of Labor defines stackable credentials as being "part of a sequence of credentials that can be accumulated over time to build up an individual's qualifications and help them move along a career pathway or up a career ladder to different and potentially higher-paying jobs."[1][2] Different types of stackable credentials include:

Type	Example
Traditional or Progressive: Stackable credentials of this sort follow a linear path where students earn short-term credentials and continue their education by pursuing a higher-level credential such as an associate's or bachelor's degree.	When a student enrolls in a nursing assistant certificate program, these courses also count toward an associate degree in nursing.
Supplemental or Value-Added: These do not follow a linear path but still allow students to enter and exit higher education as needed. Often these supplemental credentials allow employees to gain additional skills that complement a previous degree or credential.	Someone who has earned a bachelor's degree in accounting takes the certified public accountant exam to add value to their degree and boost employment opportunities
Independent: This type of stackable credential allows individuals to earn certificates that build upon one another, allowing the individual skills acquired to pave a path towards career. These independent credentials do not stack into a singular degree pathway, but do allow students to gather skills that are best for them.	A person completes a certificate in a specific IT products program (such as Cisco) and uses this to pursue a career in IT systems, with the option to upskill in the future.
Work-Based Learning or Apprenticeships: Work-based learning combines on-the-job training with formal education to help individuals build a specific skill set. These types of credentials allow individuals to gain skills and experience from employers, while employers also build out their talent pool and future workforce.	An employer sponsors an employee to participate in a manufacturing technician apprenticeship through the local community college, allowing the employee to earn more valuable skills for the job while also earning credit toward future credentials.
Military Connected: Military members can receive credit for their military experience and education, which can then be applied toward postsecondary credentials or degree. Stackable credentials through military service serve as building blocks that are critical to help this student population earn certificates and degrees in a timely fashion.	A military veteran who received Emergency Medical Services (EMS) training while enlisted is able to take a prior learning assessment (PLA) test and earn EMS certification without having to retake courses.

This wide range of stackable credentials shows the many opportunities to support all students in their journey through postsecondary education. Providing stackable credentials is a critical way to ensure Rhode Island has an educated workforce and that postsecondary education is accessible to all those who want to pursue it.

CREDIT ARTICULATION

When students look for different workforce training program options, they are often choosing between:

- **Non-credit credential programs** - short-term programs for specific skills or occupations that do not provide graduates with any credits that could be transferred to other programs.

- **Credit bearing credential programs** - any type of postsecondary credential program that does provide participants with credits that can be transferred to other credential or degree programs.

Non-credit and credit programs both offer advantages and disadvantages:[3]

KEY DIFFERENCES	
For-Credit	**Noncredit**
Intended to result in a degree (associate's or bachelor's) or a professional credential (i.e. a licensed practical nurse certification	Intended to result in a short-term certificate, indsutry-recognized certification, or other occupational credential
Eligible for federal financial aid, such as Pell grants, as long as the student meets all requirements	Not eligible for federal financial aid (unless courses are woven into a for-credit program)
Often require prerequisite courses, entry exams, or evidence of prerequisite course performance	Usually do not require prerequisite courses, entry exams, or basic skills testing
Typically offer a wide variety of general education, occupational courses, and elective courses	Focus mainly on niche skills or competencies necessary for a specific job or for employment in a specific industry
Measured in "credit hours" (i.e. associate's degree programs typically require at least 60 credits or four to five semesters of full-time enrollment)	Measured in "seat time" (hours students are required to attend class per course), which varies greatly, though most can be completed in less than a year
Programs can be accredited by regional industry-led accrediting bodies, though many are not	Programs are not accredited (though the educational institution offering the program may be accredited)

When it comes to evaluating the effectiveness of non-credit pathways, a lack of reporting requirements means that policymakers and practitioners lack meaningful student outcomes data for graduates of non-degree credential programs. Because these programs do not qualify for federal Title IV student aid programs, the entities that administer the programs- including institutions of higher education- are not required to report information about students in those programs to federal databases such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

Across the country, the lack of high-quality data about non-credit pathway programs prevents policymakers and practitioners from being able to answer important questions about the policy implications of these programs. For example, we do not have annual, complete data that gives us information about the demographics of students who pursue non-credit credential programs or the earnings premiums associated with completion of these programs. However, some studies have given us limited insight into their effects:

- A greater proportion of students in noncredit bearing programs were female, 25 years or older, and African American, compared to credit bearing programs at the same college.

- Noncredit programs had a higher proportion of students whose highest level of learning prior to entering the program was a high school diploma or GED.

- A majority of noncredit programs require out-of-pocket costs, and leaves some students choosing programs based on cost, not their career goals.

- High school graduates who earned a certificate through work-based learning or apprenticeships received a 20 percent wage premium after graduation.[4]

- Two out of every three college graduates who have a credential or certificate earned the credential prior to the degree, indicating that earning a certificate is a critical stepping stone in postsecondary education.[5]

- Credit-bearing certificates are associated with increased employability

- Credit-bearing certificates also increase the professional prestige and status of an employee, as they serve as a tool to claim legitimacy in their line of work.[6]

Rhode Island has set the ambitious goal that 70 percent of their workforce will have some form of high-quality credential by 2025, and expanding access to, improving the quality of, and increasing the completion of credit-bearing credential pathways is critical to reaching this goal and closing equity gaps that still exist in postsecondary education.[7]

BEST PRACTICE:
ALIGNING NONCREDIT AND CREDIT PROGRAMS AND PATHWAYS

The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) recognized the need to better support student success by providing non-credit to credit pathways. To do so, NCCCS implemented a Credit for Prior Learning (CPL) framework, which enables students to demonstrate knowledge gained through work or life experience that aligns with for-credit programs currently offered. Further, NCCCS developed a comprehensive guide for all 58 of its colleges that establishes statewide standards to assist colleges in implementing consistent and transparent non-credit-to-credit transfer processes across institutions. These non-credit-to-credit pathways, through the use of CPL policies, includes multiple aspects and requirements for institutions, such as:

- *Allowing students to gain credit for a wide range of life experiences* through CPLs, which includes multiple ways to determine competency
  - Continuing Education to Curriculum Credit
  - Industry-recognized Certifications to Curriculum Credit
  - Military Educational and Training Credit
  - High School to Community College Articulation Agreement
  - Portfolio of Life and Work Experiences
  - Standardized Exams
  - Cambridge International
  - Transfer Course Credit from U.S. Educational Institutions

- Each institution is required to **designate personnel to coordinate CPL activities** and communicate clear information and options to students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, staff were hired as CPL Team Leads at the NCCCS system office to oversee the process across campuses.

- *Ties the cost and fees of these noncredit-to-credit transfers based on the services performed* during the CPL and transfer process, and not be determined by the amount and level of credit awarded to a student.

- Matriculated students enrolling in NCCCS programs are **required to receive guidance to ensure benefits are maximized** and credits not duplicated.

- All personnel involved in prior learning and noncredit-to-credit pathways must receive appropriate training for their role.

- The **creation of a combined course library** that allows the search of all Curriculum and Continuing Education courses offered by the NCCCS.

- *Requires regular program evaluation* to ensure CPL programs and noncredit-to-credit pathways promote the same standard of excellence and ensure these processes undergo a similar evaluation process as other academic programs.[8]

CURRENT CREDENTIAL PATHWAYS IN RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island has a robust landscape of policies and strategies designed to expand credentials of value programs and make them accessible to more students. Below is a snapshot of various credential pathway programs currently available in Rhode Island.

- **PrepareRI** is an initiative to prepare all Rhode Island youth with the skills they need for good-paying jobs. This partnership between the Rhode Island government, private industry, the public education system, and nonprofits aims to close the gap between what students learn in school and the skills they need for high demand careers. This initiative involves multiple programs, including:

  - **PrepareRI Internship** offers public high school students paid summer internships with Rhode Island employers and college credits for successful completion.

  - **Work-Based Learning** aims to provide high school students with access to high-quality, real-world learning experiences.

  - **Career and Technical Education (CTE)** is designed for high school students who are interested in entering the workforce or careers who would benefit from postsecondary education and training opportunities.

  - **All Course Network** allows middle and high school students to take courses at other schools, private colleges, and other providers for free.

  - **Dual and Concurrent Enrollment** enables students to take credit-earning college courses while still in high school.

  - **P-TECH** or Pathways in Technology Early College High School, is an initiative that integrates high school, college, and industry programming to allow high school students to earn an associate degree while in high school.

  - **Career Exploration and Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)** provide students the opportunity to personalize their education experiences and support students' attainment of goals.

  - **Real Skills for Youth** provides strategic partnerships between industry, K-12 schools, and community-based organizations to develop and implement high-quality paid work-based learning experiences and career readiness programming for youth.

- **Real Pathways Rhode Island** is a statewide workforce development initiative that partners with community organizations to train and support job seekers in learning the skills and abilities that employers are seeking.

- **Real Jobs Rhode Island** anticipates the demand of the job market through partnerships with industry leaders, and then works to accelerate the supply of workers by building programs and clearing barriers to teach those particular skills to potential employees.

- **Rhode Island Innovates 2.0** builds upon the 2016 Brookings Institution report that identified high value economic growth areas to counter changes in Rhode Island industries and workforce populations. RI Innovates 2.0 expands work past advanced industries to support job creation and skills training in all aspects of Rhode Island's economy. RI Innovates 2.0 also acknowledges the rapidly changing technological environment and how the state must adapt to automation.

- **SupplyRI** connects local suppliers to the needs of larger Rhode Island institutions through databases, websites, training, and events to guide local business in understanding current postsecondary educational offerings.

GENERAL DYNAMICS' ELECTRIC BOAT

Employers have a significant role to play in helping their employees access workforce development programs and earn stackable credentials. General Dynamics recognized the value of employees and the importance of providing opportunities that allows employees to grow and gain new skills. This philosophy has led General Dynamics to develop one of the strongest employee training and workforce development programs in Rhode Island for Electric Boat (EB). Opportunities for continuing education for prospective and current employees include:

- **Expanded high school partnerships** with over a dozen Rhode Island CTE and Comprehensive High School partnerships. New manufacturing curricula have been designed by EB and its suppliers to build a pathway to careers in the industry. Internship and Co-op Programs have been established to increase interest in the manufacturing industry. An *apprenticeship program* trains active employees over a three year period in one of the many skilled trade disciplines in the company.

- *Technical education* that provides tuition assistance for personnel who meet eligibility requirements and want to pursue advanced engineering and technical degrees from institutions in Rhode Island.

- *Partnership with CCRI, New England Institute of Technology, and Thielsch Engineering* which provides training to unskilled workers at the Westerly Education Center, New England Institute of Technology, and Thielsch Engineering. These relationships are critical to EB's pipeline of employees and each of these institutions' support provides the space and resources to deliver the training needed to meet anticipated demand.

- *The Boat for Women Program* is a 2 week trade exploratory program exclusively for women to allow them to explore EB's core trades and determine if a manufacturing career is right for them.

- *University Relations & Internships/Co-Op Programs* are designed to attract high-level talent through relationship building with institutions of higher education (IHEs). A variety of internships are offered in various fields, allowing students to gain real work experience while still in school.

- *Recruiting events* across a wide range of IHEs to recruit talented students from a variety of backgrounds and majors.

- *Leadership Development* programs that are designed to equip employees of all experience levels with the skills to achieve their career goals and personal objectives.

This holistic approach to workforce development and continuing education is an integral component of the growth and sustainability for General Dynamics' Electric Boat.[9]

BEST PRACTICES FROM OTHER STATES REGARDING CREDENTIAL PATHWAY

While the above programs showcase the various ways Rhode Island is helping students access credential pathways, there are still areas for improvement. In particular, there are areas of best practices from which Rhode Island can learn and improve their credential pathways.[10]

Creating and Providing High-Value Credentials

- **Vermont:** The Flexible Pathways Initiative encourages and supports school districts to develop and expand high-quality educational experiences. It also promotes opportunities for Vermont students to achieve postsecondary readiness through high-quality education experiences. Flexible pathways provide: expansion to dual enrollment and early college programs, increased access to work-based learning, career and technical education, and personalized learning plans.

- **Michigan:** The Michigan Reconnect program is a scholarship program for Michigan residents that provides scholarships for students to attend their in-district community colleges. It also provides one-time grants for Michiganders to enroll in an approved training program with Skills Scholarship.

- **Virginia:** The State Board of Community Colleges requires each community college to develop policies and procedures for the award of academic credit for the completion of a state-approved registered apprenticeship.

- **Oregon:** The Career Pathways program provides a series of connected education, training programs, and student support services to enable individuals to secure a job or advance their career in a high demand industry.

Providing Information for Students about Available Credentials

- **Kentucky:** The Council of Postsecondary Education is required to compile annual data on in-demand jobs within the state and to develop a delivery method that ensures access to postsecondary instruction in these in-demand job areas for prospective students.

- **West Virginia:** The Students' Right-to-Know Act supports high school students in their decision making by informing students and their families of the cost and benefits of certificate programs, vocational programs, two year colleges, four year colleges, and other alternative career pathways.

- **Connecticut:** Pending legislation would require the development of a registry that contains all secondary and postsecondary credentials offered in Connecticut so that students, employees, and policymakers can make informed decisions.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. What can Rhode Island do to close the data gap around credentials of value? Is this an important step in moving this work forward?

2. What role can state leaders play in identifying what counts as a high value credential? What about institutions of higher education? Industry?

3. What incentives should state leaders implement to encourage the creation and use of credentialing programs? What can Rhode Island do to create more access to these programs for more Rhode Islanders looking to upskill?

4. How can Rhode Island better inform prospective students of the types of credentials and programs available to them?

5. In what ways can Rhode Island utilize credentialing programs focused on priority economic sectors to ensure an educated workforce?

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CREATING A MORE PROSPEROUS RHODE ISLAND ECONOMY THROUGH POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Workforce development initiatives in postsecondary education became a priority in the U.S. as a result of the Great Depression. This cataclysmic economic event caused massive unemployment and workers were left without the tools and skills needed to fill remaining and emerging jobs.[1] As a result, workforce development initiatives became essential to ensure workers have the expertise needed to fill the available jobs. Fast forward to 2021, the U.S. economy is intimately connected to education and training that is a product of the American higher education system. In fact, after 2008 almost every job that pays a livable wage requires a credential beyond high school. The COVID-19 pandemic economy provides this once again, as the majority of Rhode Islanders who lost their jobs during the pandemic were those without a postsecondary credential. Nationally, there are 9.2 million job openings in the United States as of May 2021,[2] and many of the workers that were laid off are in need of training to develop the skills needed for the jobs of the future.[3]

| WORKFORCE TRAINING AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS[4][5]	
Postsecondary Education	Any type of education or training after high school, including universities, colleges, trade, vocational, and technical schools.
Workforce Development	Any initiative that is designed to equip workers with the skills and traits necessary to fill the jobs that support the current and future local economy.
Career and Technical Education (CTE)	An educational initiative that helps students earn an industry credential and prepare them to enter the workforce. Programs can be located in high schools, postsecondary institutions, adult skills training facilities, and CTE centers across the state, and are equipped to prepare youth and adults for a range of high-wage, high-skill, high-demand careers.
Work-Based Learning (WBL)	Work-based learning combines on-the-job training with formal education to help individuals build a specific skill set. These types of credentials allow individuals to gain skills and experience from employers, while employers also build out their talent pool and future workforce.
Credential	All documents or other records of achievement that demonstrate a person's qualifications for an occupation or task given their mastery of a subject, skill, or trade.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES: BENEFITS AND ALIGNMENT WITH STATE PRIORITY SECTORS

Providing equitable access to high-quality workforce development programs results in significant economic benefits for individuals and the communities where they live- as long as those programs are aligned with the regional workforce needs of Rhode Island.

We know that individuals benefit from pursuing higher education. Rhode Islanders who attend college are less likely to live below the poverty line than someone who does not attend postsecondary education. Each additional year of schooling increases earning and reduces the likelihood of an individual being unemployed. On average in Rhode Island in 2019, someone who obtains a bachelor's degree made over $56k, compared to $41k for someone with an associate degree, and $36k for someone with a high school degree. Further, those who pursue postsecondary education see better health outcomes, higher rates of happiness, increased agency and self-empowerment, stronger civic engagement, and increased critical thinking skills.[6]

■ **AVERAGE SALARY IN RHODE ISLAND BY ATTAINMENT LEVEL**
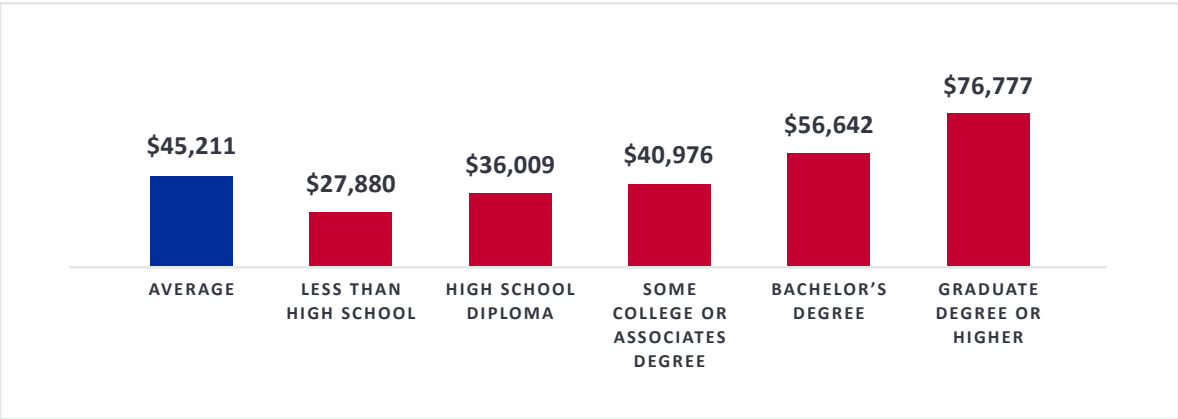
There are overall economic benefits for the state when more residents have access to postsecondary education and workforce training that aligns with state priority sectors. There is a direct link between a high-quality education and a healthy economy.[7] As individuals attain greater education, their probability of employment and ability to demand higher wages increases. Higher earnings result in annual increases to tax revenue and boost to gross domestic product (GDP) growth due to higher purchasing power. It is estimated that a one percentage point increase in a state's bachelor's degree attainment increases that state's GDP by about 0.08 percentage points, which would have amounted to an additional $49.5 million to the state's economy in 2019.[8][9]

However, all of the benefits cited above can only be realized if stakeholders work to create alignment between the skills of graduates and the needs of employers, known as Labor Market Alignment (LMA).[10] In order to create correct alignment, a variety of partners, including leaders from various business sectors, K-12 and postsecondary institutions, community organizations, and multiple levels of government must come together to navigate this difficult task. Without LMA, states risk creating a surplus of college graduates that cannot sustain the state's current economy, forcing graduates to search elsewhere for jobs and leaving employers scrambling to find workers.

As policymakers seek to create greater LMA in Rhode Island by expanding or refining workforce training program options, it is important to understand which economic sectors are especially important for the overall health of the state's economy.

RHODE ISLAND PRIORITY ECONOMIC SECTORS IDENTIFIED BY 2020 RI COMMERCE REPORT[11]	
Life Sciences	Rhode Island's strength in biomedical innovation has drawn business development based on the state's history of creating environments that facilitate collaboration between basic research, clinical research, and industry development.
IT Software, Cyber-Physical Systems, and Data Analytics	Futuristic innovation that leads to practical application draws investment in the state's technology industry to utilize the state's strengths in engineering, design, and computer science.
Defense, Shipbuilding, and Maritime	A history of seafaring in Rhode Island has created a foundation for today's robust and diverse maritime industries. Workforce expertise in defense-related ship and submarine building, marine tourism, environmental preservation, and ocean cartography make this industry a key part of the state's economy.
Advanced Business Services	Rhode Island companies with expertise in web services, client management, financial services, and other necessary services for business management serve as third-party providers for corporations around the nation.
Design, Food, and Custom Manufacturing	While appearing unrelated, these industries thrive in Rhode Island due to the thousands of innovative and intelligent graduates who graduate from institutions of higher education (IHEs) in Rhode Island each year. Coupled with business-friendly policies, these businesses serve as a cornerstone for the Rhode Island economy.
Travel and Hospitality	Rhode Island is a beloved and vibrant vacation destination, and there are limitless opportunities to enhance recreational offerings and hospitality services to an already thriving industry.

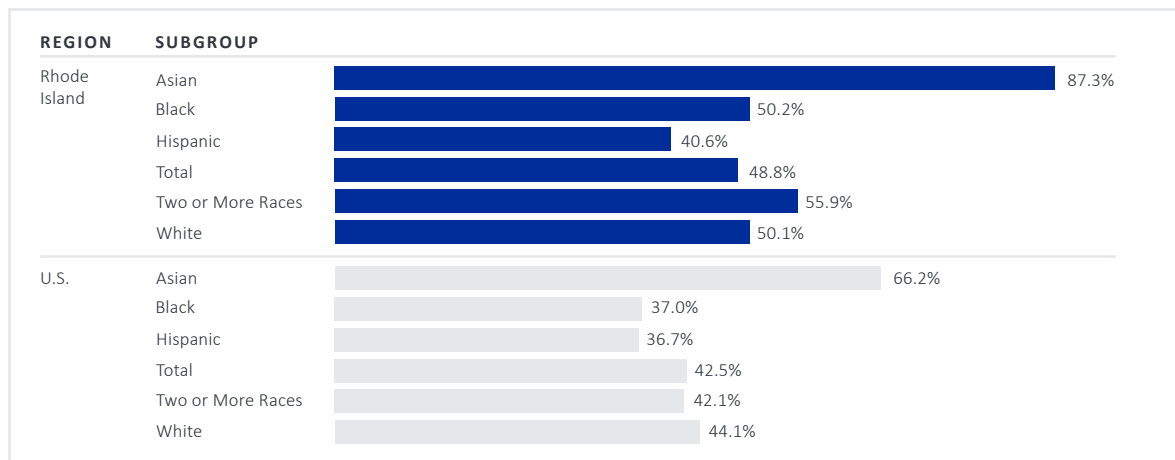## CHALLENGES TO ECONOMIC GROWTH AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

As policymakers and practitioners work to ensure that all Rhode Island residents are able to realize the benefits of workforce development, there are a number of challenges that may prevent today's students from accessing and completing postsecondary opportunities. Without access to postsecondary education and workforce training, Rhode Island's economy will suffer and residents will lack the skills and traits needed to be employable in the changing market.

Equity Gaps in Postsecondary Education

As state leaders work to grow Rhode Island's economic prosperity, it is important to ensure that all students are able to find success in the higher education system that plays such an integral role in workforce development. The fact that equity gaps by race and ethnicity persist across all points of a students' postsecondary journey poses a major challenge to driving progress in this space.

- Enrollment: Although national enrollment has increased among Black, Hispanic, and Multiracial students ages 18 to 24, enrollment rates for those students remain below the rates for their white and Asian student counterparts across the nation. As seen in the graphic below, Rhode Island is above the U.S. average in enrollment across all racial groups, but equity gaps between racial groups still exist in the state.[12]

PERCENTAGE OF 18- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS ENROLLED IN HIGHER EDUCATION, BY RACE/ETHNICITY[13]

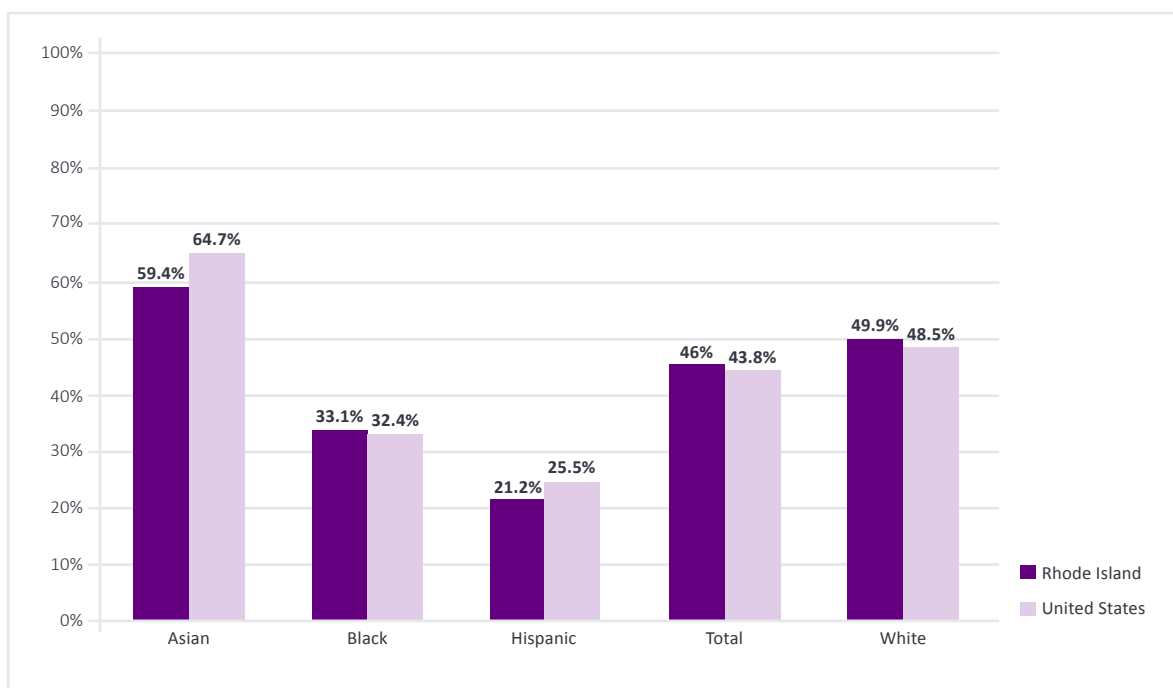| REGION	SUBGROUP	
Rhode Island	Asian	87.3%
	Black	50.2%
	Hispanic	40.6%
	Total	48.8%
	Two or More Races	55.9%
	White	50.1%
U.S.	Asian	66.2%
	Black	37.0%
	Hispanic	36.7%
	Total	42.5%
	Two or More Races	42.1%
	White	44.1%

- Persistence and Retention: These racial inequities continue from enrollment throughout a student's time in postsecondary education. Persistence refers to students who remain continuously enrolled, regardless of institution, while retention refers to students who remain enrolled in the same institution. Studies have shown that, nationwide, the persistence and enrollment rates of Black and Hispanic students are lower than rates for their white and Asian peers.

■ **NATIONWIDE PERSISTENCE AND RETENTION RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY, ALL INSTITUTIONS[14]**

Persistence rates (Continued Enrollment at Other Institution + Continued Enrollment at Starting Institution/Retention):

- Overall (N=2,572,269): 73.9% total; 66.2% retention
- Asian (N=132,855): 86.5% total; 79.5% retention
- White (N=1,027,878): 79.3% total; 69.5% retention
- Latinx (N=426,211): 68.6% total; 62.0% retention
- Black (N=237,645): 64.9% total; 51.6% retention

Legend:
- Continued Enrollment at Other Institution
- Continued Enrollment at Starting Institution (Retention)

- Attainment: The last step of postsecondary education, attainment of a credential, further shows the racial inequities that exist in education, as Black and Hispanic students complete at lower rates than their white peers.

■ **PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS WITH AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE OR HIGHER, BY RACE/ETHNICITY[15]**

Race/Ethnicity	Rhode Island	United States
Asian	59.4%	64.7%
Black	33.1%	32.4%
Hispanic	21.2%	25.5%
Total	46%	43.8%
White	49.9%	48.5%

Cost of Postsecondary Education

Although Rhode Island has continued to invest in the public higher education sector, with a small increase in state funding since the 2008 level, the tuition costs paid by students and families has increased significantly over that same time period. These increasing costs have resulted in students taking on large amounts of debt to finance their education. The rising cost of higher education and the prevalence of student loan debt are barriers that prevent more people from taking advantage of workforce training programs at IHEs. People with existing student loan debt may be more reluctant to apply for a program that would allow them to re- or up-skill because they are wary of taking on additional debt.

After a decrease that followed the economic recession of 2008, the state and local funding provided to Rhode Island's public higher education sector (Net Appropriations per Full-Time Enrollment) steadily increased and is now slightly higher than the 2008 funding level.
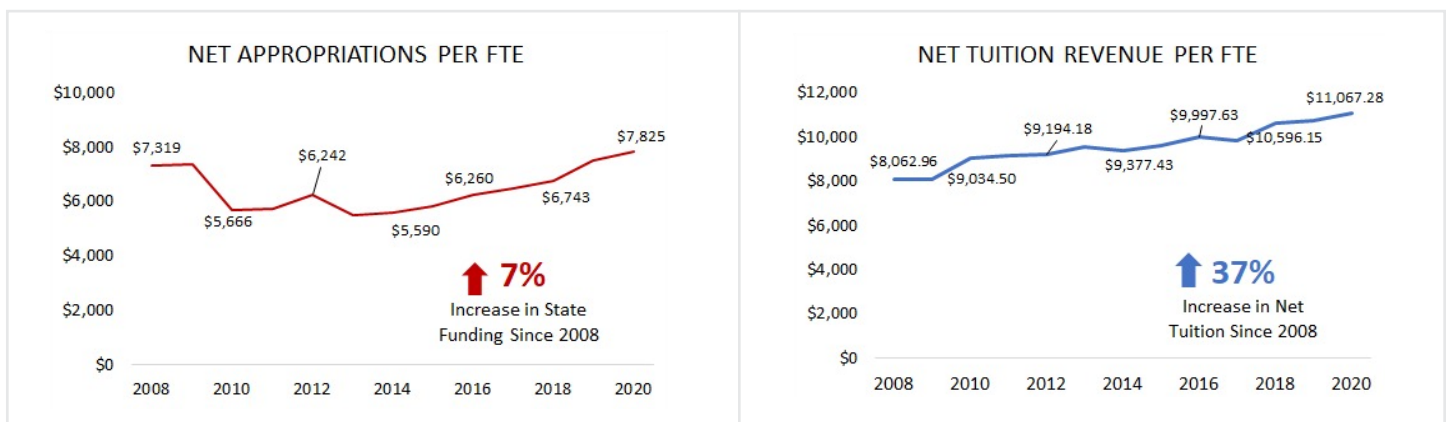
However, over the same period, the total cost of tuition and fees paid by students after they have applied financial aid (Net Tuition Revenue per FTE) has increased significantly.

▌ **AVERAGE DEBT OF GRADUATES AND PERCENTAGE OF GRADUATES WITH STUDENT LOAN DEBT**[16]

	RHODE ISLAND	UNITED STATES
Percentage of Graduates with Student Loan Debt	$37,614 [4th highest in the nation]	$28,950
Average Student Loan Debt Amount	59% [18th highest in the nation]	62%
Average Monthly Payment	$217.74	210.73
Average Time to Pay Off Loans[17]	13.88 Years	11.30 Years

Lack of Student Support Services for Today's Students

- The changing postsecondary student population means that the needs of students are also changing. However, little has been done to adapt current student support service offerings to cater to the needs of today's students- which include adult learners, first-generation students, student parents, students who work part- or full-time, and more. Traditionally, institutions provide a wide range of disparate services for all students, but incorporating holistic student support ensures that students receive specific personalized support rather than generalized services.[18]

The COVID-19 Pandemic

- The pandemic has magnified and exacerbated inequities in higher education. Additionally, the pandemic has forced education online and changed the ways students and educators interact and who has the ability to access postsecondary education. These shifts have impacted higher education enrollment in Rhode Island.[19]

■ **HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENT DECLINE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC[20]**

Rhode Island	United States
-5.5%	**-4%**
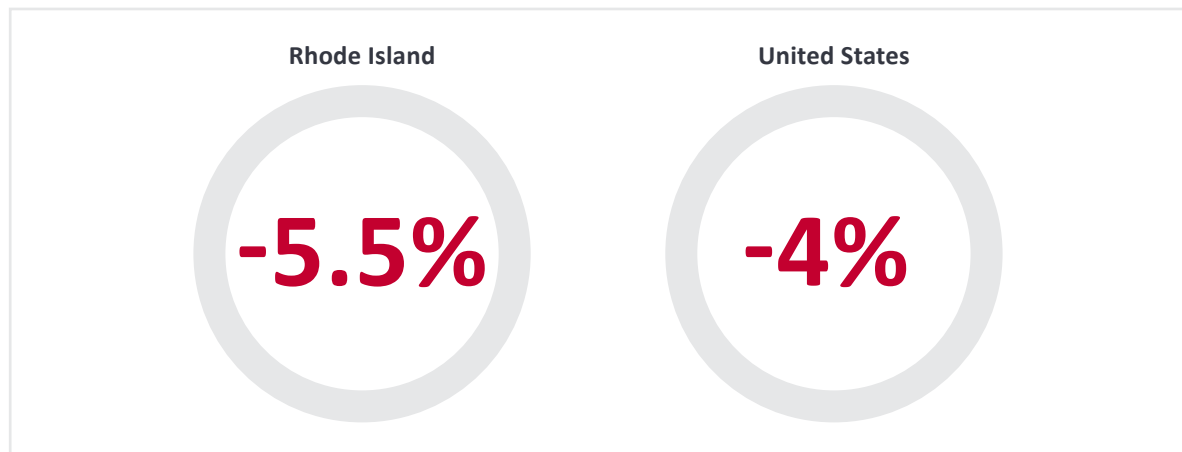
BEST PRACTICES IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT AND CAREER TRAINING

Given the importance of helping students succeed in workforce development programs, state leaders have looked for ways to fill those skills gaps by using innovative and creative strategies.

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Align Postsecondary Education and Workforce Needs: States can incentivize a range of education and training activities that are aimed at creating the skills needed to thrive in the labor force, particularly in areas of highest need within the state.

- **Work underway in RI:**
  - **PrepareRI** is a strategic partnership between the Rhode Island government, private industry leaders, the public education system, institutions of higher education (IHEs), and nonprofits across the state that provides a comprehensive plan to restructure the talent pipeline and align career pathways with high-demand career fields.
  - **Real Jobs RI**, launched in 2015, ensures that employers have the talented employees they need to compete and grow, while also providing targeted education and skills training for workers. Real Jobs RI anticipates workforce demands to build educational programs and remove barriers, making it easier for employees to gain training and skills.
- **Florida**, in 2021, passed legislation that creates a centralized office charged with coordinating alignment of workforce development goals. The law also requires student advisors in high school and postsecondary spaces to use the state's career planning resources- which have information about regional workforce needs- when providing guidance to students.[21]
- **Wyoming**, in January 2021, established the Wyoming Innovation Network (WIN), a partnership between the University of Wyoming and state community colleges to develop strategic programming to meet the state's evolving workforce needs. Leveraging federal funds from the 2020 CARES Act, WIN establishes a research and market analysis agenda aimed at technology transfer and commercialization, and seeks to develop revenue sources like corporate partnerships to provide new opportunities to students and sustain the program after CARES funding expires.

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Recognize Skills-Based Education and Competency: This approach embraces outcomes-based programs and recognizes that people develop skills in a variety of ways. As such, credentials are awarded based on measures of how much students have learned, what credentials they are already qualified to receive, and their overall ability to do a specific job.

- **Work underway in RI:**
  - Rhode Island has established a framework of **Pathways Endorsements** for high school students that certify whether a student has accomplished deep learning in a chosen area of interest and is prepared for employment or further education in this career path. Application of skills is demonstrated through a performance based assessment such as a portfolio or capstone project.
- **Illinois** created the Gateways to Opportunities program, a competency-based system of preparing, credentialing, and offering professional development opportunities to workers in the early childhood education sector. States could adapt a program such as this to align with their priority workforce sectors.
- **Minnesota's fastTRAC Adult Career Pathways program** integrates basic skills education, career-specific training, and support services, to meet the needs of working adults. The program consists of a series of connected educational and training programs that allow low-skill students to advance over time in careers that support the local and regional economies.

Expand Work-Based Learning Opportunities: This approach couples real-life work experience with the educational environment to allow students to earn knowledge and skills while still enrolled in school.

- **Work underway in RI:**
  - **The PrepareRI Internship Program** places Rhode Island high school juniors in paid summer internships with the state's top employers in a range of industries. Since 2018, over 900 students have participated in the internship.

- **South Carolina** offers high school students the opportunity to participate in youth apprenticeship programs that combine high school curriculum and career and technology training with on-the-job training. Eligible businesses can receive a tax credit of $1,000 for each registered apprentice employed for at least seven months during each year of an apprenticeship program, for up to four years.

- **West Virginia** provides a **Simulated Workplace** program, designed to provide students the opportunity to engage in work-based learning for students with access issues. High school students gain experience interviewing and engaging in a workplace environment through simulated site visits from business leaders.

- **Maryland** has adopted a work-based learning continuum that supports work-based learning from preK through college and includes four career-building competencies: career awareness, career exploration, career preparation, and career seeking and advancement. These competencies expose students to career awareness in early grades so that students have the foundation for work-based learning in high school and postsecondary programs.

Reform Developmental Education and Postsecondary Readiness: Developmental education is used to ensure that students who enter higher education have the knowledge base they need to succeed in postsecondary courses. Entering higher education without this knowledge base extends the time to credential completion and adds additional financial burden on students. Development education reform and streamlining postsecondary readiness can support degree and credential attainment in a more efficient and effective fashion.

- **Work underway in RI:**
  - The **PrepareRI Readiness Project** is a collaboration between K-12 and postsecondary education institutions to increase Rhode Island students' readiness for college through increasing academic readiness, streamlining matriculation, and improving communication to students and families about postsecondary options.

- **North Carolina**'s Community College System implemented the Reinforced Instruction for Student Excellence (RISE) program which changed the way IHEs assess whether students are prepared for college-level classes and uses corequisite courses to better serve students who need additional support.[22]

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Why is the alignment between Rhode Island workforce needs and higher education important for economic growth?

2. Where is the Rhode Island higher education system currently successful in responding to the needs of the state? Where is there room for improvement?

3. How do the current challenges to higher education and workforce development that students face affect Rhode Island's ability to produce an educated and skilled workforce?

4. What are some outcomes-based investments that Rhode Island can make to improve workforce readiness and create economic return on investment?

5. What specific steps can state leaders take to improve alignment between workforce needs and postsecondary education?

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