

RHODE ISLAND OFFICE OF THE POSTSECONDARY COMMISSIONER ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING THREE: UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF TODAY'S POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS

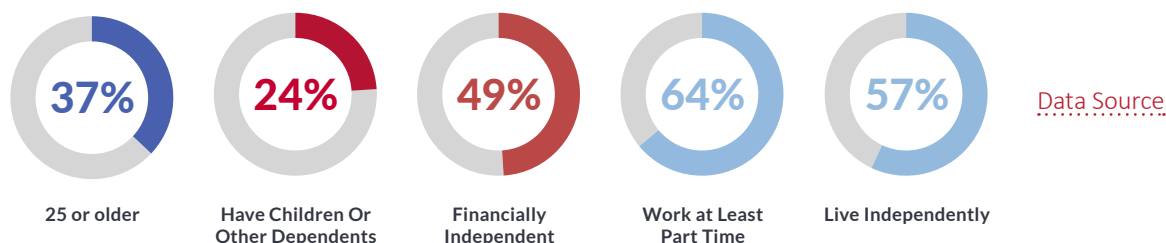
TODAY'S POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS

Postsecondary education has been an integral component of America since The Great Society in the 1960s. The passage of the Higher Education Act of 1965 expanded America's postsecondary education system by making it more accessible and affordable to all.¹ The number of students participating in higher education has continued to increase over time, but today's generation of students does not necessarily fit the mold of the historically traditional postsecondary student. The students who are currently engaging with higher education have needs that extend beyond the classroom and existing postsecondary structures and systems were not originally designed to accommodate these needs.

A traditional higher education student is generally considered to be someone who enrolls in an institution of higher education (IHE) full time immediately after graduating from high school, is financially dependent on their parents, and does not work while attending college. Since the early 2000s, though, there has been a significant shift in the student population.² Today, over 37 percent of students are over 25 years of age, 24 percent have children or other dependents, 49 percent are financially independent, 64 percent work at least part time, and 57 percent live independently.³

Characteristics of Today's Higher Education Student Population in the U.S.

The average college student is twenty-six years old.



Here are some examples of specific populations of "non-traditional" students:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| First-Generation Students | Students who are the first person from their family to attend higher education. |
| Employed Students | Students who are employed full time while enrolled in postsecondary education. |
| Adult Learners | Students who are over the age of 24. |
| Military and Veteran Students | Students who have served or are actively serving in a branch of the military. |

¹ American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, "Higher Education Act," <https://www.aacrao.org/advocacy/issues/higher-education-act>.

² U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "Nontraditional Undergraduates," <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002012.pdf>.

³ Lumina Foundation, "Today's Student," <https://www.luminafoundation.org/resource/todays-student/>.

Today's higher education students face decisions about what types of IHEs to enroll in – decisions that would ideally include information about how different schools would provide wraparound services that support student completion. Here is a snapshot of where today's postsecondary students in Rhode Island are enrolling and how they are faring:

Higher Education Landscape

Number of postsecondary students in Rhode Island: **81,747**

| 2-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS | | 4-YEAR PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS | | 4-YEAR PRIVATE NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS | | FOR-PROFIT INSTITUTIONS | |
|---|------------------------|---|------------------------|---|------------------------|---|--|
| # of Institutions | 1 | # of Institutions | 2 | # of Institutions | 12 | # of Institutions | 6 |
| % of All Current Postsecondary Students | 18% (RI) 30% (U.S.) | % of All Current Postsecondary Students | 31% (RI) 44% (U.S.) | % of All Current Postsecondary Students | 49% (RI) 20% (U.S.) | % of All Current Postsecondary Students | 2% (RI) 7% (U.S.) |
| Completion Rate [3-year] | 19% (RI) 36% (U.S.) | Completion Rate [6-year] | 61% (RI) 58% (U.S.) | Completion Rate [6-year] | 76% (RI) 67% (U.S.) | Completion Rate | 70% (RI), [3-year] 35% (U.S.), [6-year] |

Data Source: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Institutional Characteristics Survey, IPEDS 2019 Enrollment Survey, IPEDS Graduation Rate Survey.

THE FULL SCOPE OF COSTS FACED BY TODAY'S POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS

As today's postsecondary students consider decisions about enrolling or continuing their studies, they are faced with a wide range of costs associated with being a higher education or workforce training student. One factor in discussing the cost of higher education is the difference between an institution's published total cost of attendance and the actual out-of-pocket costs, or net price, that students and families pay. The total cost of attendance includes:

- Tuition and fees
- Housing and meals
- Books and supplies
- Transportation
- Loan fees
- Dependent care
- Other costs associated with living while pursuing a degree

The total net cost of tuition is an estimate of the actual cost a student and their family will pay during the school year and is calculated by subtracting the grants and scholarships awarded from an institution's total cost of attendance. Non-tuition costs, such as fees and textbooks, are less predictable and have risen in recent years, making calculating a student's out-of-pocket costs difficult and creating barriers to access for many students.

Basic Needs Insecurity

A major factor in the non-tuition costs faced by higher education students is related to the idea of basic needs insecurity, which occurs when students have difficulty accessing food, water, shelter, and safety, and has significant implications on college students' success. From this national report, one in four students dropped a class as a result of food insecurity alone. Without supportive interventions, students facing basic needs insecurity are more likely to receive lower grades, face increased time to graduation, or, ultimately, drop out of school.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated basic needs insecurity on many college campuses and has highlighted the extent to which postsecondary students struggle to fulfill their basic needs. In 2021, three in five students experienced basic needs insecurity. Moreover, there were large differences in basic needs insecurity by student subgroups: 54 percent of white students experienced basic needs insecurity, compared to 64 percent of Hispanic/Latinx students, 70 percent of Black students, and 75 percent of Indigenous students.

For many students, basic needs insecurity resulted from losing a job or having their work hours reduced due to COVID-19. In response, many IHEs created supportive resources for students with unmet basic needs. Communication, or lack thereof, however, often prevented students from being aware of these resources or receiving these benefits. This lack of awareness caused many students to miss opportunities to apply for unemployment insurance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and emergency aid simply because they were not aware they were eligible to receive these benefits.

Mental health was also a concern for many students facing basic needs experiences, with over half of community college and four-year college students reporting that they could not concentrate on schooling during the pandemic. While many institutions of higher education created supportive resources for students facing basic needs insecurity, lack of communication and awareness of resources continued to be a barrier. Higher education students who lack access to broadband internet or devices needed for coursework - a barrier that is more prevalent for low-income, Black, and Hispanic students - faced greater difficulty in navigating the shift to remote learning brought on by the pandemic.

THE ROLE OF WRAPAROUND SUPPORTS IN STUDENT SUCCESS

Wraparound student supports are critical to increasing the retention, persistence, and completion rates of students. Wraparound supports are designed to support the whole student, by providing access to not only academic support but also a comprehensive system of support.⁴ Wraparound supports range widely, but many initiatives include programs to address food insecurity, emergency financial aid for financial hardships, childcare services for adult learners, transportation for low-income students, and numerous other areas of support that a student may need during their time in postsecondary education.

We know that today's higher education students face a variety of barriers and challenges to success. When a student must face any of these numerous challenges, they may struggle to meet their educational or personal responsibilities. These undue burdens force many students to stop out or drop out of their educational program. Wraparound services can help increase persistence and retention, and ultimately, completion by helping students overcome the challenges associated with life as a higher education student.

A study by the University of Chicago Poverty Lab found that offering wraparound support supports to students increased full-time enrollment by 13 percent and increased retention from one term to the next by a range of 11 to 16 percent. Further, providing wraparound supports to community college students has even more significant benefits, as students nearly doubled their retention to next term and ultimately led to a 35 percent increase in full-time enrollment for students who took advantage of the services.⁵ Providing more comprehensive wraparound student services in Rhode Island would make a significant difference in efforts to meet the needs of today's higher education students in ways that will support equity in access, persistence, and completion.

⁴ Mendoza, J. (n.d). National College Transition Network. <https://www.collegetransition.org/student-supporters/promising-practices/wrap-around-services/>

⁵ Bertrand, M., Hallberg, K., Hofmeister, K., Morgan, B., & Shirey, E. (2019). Increasing academic progress among low-income community college students: Early evidence from a randomized controlled trial.

CURRENT WRAPAROUND STUDENT SUPPORT INITIATIVES IN RHODE ISLAND

Emergency Grant Aid Programs

IHE leaders in Rhode Island have established aid programs that provide funding to help students cover a range of costs associated with being a higher education student – such as an unexpected healthcare cost or an increased risk of food insecurity. While some programs in Rhode Island predate the COVID-19 pandemic, all IHEs that received federal stimulus funding were required to use at least half of their allotment for emergency grant aid for students.

- In order to complement the newly enacted Rhode Island Promise Scholarship program, the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) created the [Rhode Island Promise Plus program](#) thanks to a gift from the Hassenfeld Family Foundation. The Promise Plus program provided students with grants of up to \$500 to help cover costs such as food, transportation, and textbooks.
 - CCRI continues to provide [Emergency Grants](#) for students, currently through the federal stimulus funding provided to IHEs.
- Rhode Island College (RIC) also has a [Student Emergency Funds program](#) that makes funding available to students – especially those who experience unexpected circumstances that jeopardize their ability to continue their studies.
 - RIC used this program to coordinate the disbursement of federal stimulus funding and also to connect students with a number of other support resources in the surrounding community.
- The University of Rhode Island (URI) set up a [process to disburse federal stimulus funding](#) that students could use for costs such as food, housing, and childcare and provided regular updates on the status of funding distribution.

Rhode Island Reconnect

[RI Reconnect](#) is an initiative overseen by the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (OPC) that helps adult learners who are looking to re-engage with higher education and workforce training programs. In order to help adult students meet their range of needs – including flexible course schedules, childcare options, and assistance with managing student loan debt – the RI Reconnect program connects participants with an *educational navigator*, a person who can guide adult learners through the process of finding resources that will help remove barriers to reenrollment. The program has seen an increase in demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with more displaced adult workers seeking to re- or up-skill and reenter the workforce.

Back to Work RI

In response to the thousands of Rhode Island workers who were displaced by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training created the [Back to Work RI initiative](#). One hallmark of the program is the provision of wraparound support services that help displaced workers cover costs such as childcare, technology, transportation, and other basic needs while enrolled in their education/training opportunity. In collaboration with OPC, the Back to Work RI program uses the RI Reconnect navigator model to provide comprehensive needs assessment and educational coaching for participants. Back to Work RI, which works in close partnership with regional employers, also uses career coaches as well as an AI chatbot to guide displaced workers as they make decisions about reengaging with postsecondary education and training opportunities that will lead to employment.

OTHER BEST PRACTICES IN WRAPAROUND STUDENT SUPPORTS

As Rhode Island looks to build on current efforts to encourage higher education student success, policymakers may consider adopting strategies and lessons learned from other states and IHEs. The following best practices speak to the various ways state and institutional leaders can expand student services to ensure the holistic needs of students are met.

■ **Create a robust single-stop website, dedicated statewide office, or resource center where students can find access to the various wraparound support services available to them.**

- The **Arkansas** Department of Education (ADOE) put together a list of wraparound services that residents can use to find resources that meet their needs. The ADOE collaborated with the Department of Health and the Division of Children and Family services to pull resources together on their [newly-developed statewide community portal](#). In the portal, users can search for data on resources by filtering by region and category. For example, users who select the Southeast Region and Food Pantries as a category will be referred to six locations in the region that provide meal assistance.
- In **North Carolina**, [Single Stop](#) partners with community colleges to connect students to community-based service providers that provide access to resources such as food stamps, local food pantries, and other items to help students meet their basic needs.

■ **Provide a suite of support services to help students adapt to higher education:** The transition to postsecondary education can be difficult for some students, particularly those with less exposure to college such as first-generation students. Providing support services is critical to ensure that *all* students have the advice, support, and resources needed to succeed.

- **California State University:** The Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) at CSU provides a holistic set of counseling and support services for low-income and traditionally underserved students who attend a school in the CSU system. While the specific services vary by campus, EOP generally provides participants with ongoing advising, tutoring, mentoring, and workshops designed to increase student retention and persistence rates.
- **Prince George's Community College:** The Diverse Male Student Initiative is an experiential two-year program offered at PGCC to help male students gain access to additional resources and focus their energies on self-improvement and community involvement. Participating students gain skills to enhance their abilities to procure leadership roles by developing a network, participating in career and personal development training, workforce experiences, and more. The program has boosted persistence and retention rates at PGCC and is highlighted in [this video](#).



- **Provide flexible course delivery options:** Given the various responsibilities that today's students must balance, providing flexible schedules, late night classes, and hybrid course delivery support adult learners and other students by meeting them where they are.
 - **Texas:** The Dallas Community College District and Houston County Community College System have collaborated to create a virtual platform for education. The project aims to develop models of several replicable pathways to Texas colleges by combining industry-recognized non-credit certifications with College and Technical Education programs in high-need areas such as automotive and information technologies.
- **Provide student assistance in the form of emergency grant aid:** One of the biggest factors in a student's decision to stop out or drop out of postsecondary education is unanticipated financial hardships, and providing grants to cover these emergency costs can help students persist to graduation.
 - **Georgia State University:** GSU implemented a number of complementary completion initiatives for students including the Panther Retention Grants program, which provides small amounts of aid for students who experience some sort of financial emergency that may prevent them from completing their studies.
 - **NCCCS Finish Line Grants:** In 2018, Governor Cooper established the Finish Line Grants program. The purpose of these grants is to provide students with financial assistance when the student experiences some sort of hardship, for example healthcare, childcare, housing or other financial emergencies that may keep a student from completing their education. These grants act as a partnership with the community college and the Workforce Development Board to establish funds and a process to disseminate funds to students. Students who have completed over half of their degree or credential are eligible to apply.
- **Use predictive analytics to keep students on track:** State and institutional leaders can use IHE data to ensure that students stay on track to complete their degrees on time and to target interventions toward students most at risk so they can ensure that those students have the resources they need.
 - **Minnesota Statewide Longitudinal Education Data System (SLEDs):** Minnesota developed SLEDs to match student data from pre-k through completion of postsecondary education and into the workforce. This system bridged existing data with other incoming data to design targeted improvement strategies for students. SLEDs brings together data from education and the workforce to identify the most viable pathways for individuals to achieve successful outcomes, inform decisions to support and improve education, and assist the transition from education to workforce.
 - **Georgia State University:** Since 2012, GSU has leveraged its institutional data and predictive analytics to make sure that students are on track to complete their degrees on time. The IHE's GPS Advising system allows GSU counselors to target supportive interventions for students who enroll in courses that do not help them make progress toward their degree, or to those who are underperforming in key courses.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

1. Given the discussion in session one about today's postsecondary students, why are wraparound student supports critical to the success of students?
2. How can IHEs better provide wraparound supports to students? What is the role of OPC in providing these supports?
3. How can the stakeholders in this room create urgency and funding to support the implementation of more comprehensive wraparound student supports?