Complete College Rhode Island

How the smallest state can take big steps to transform the state and its economy through college completion...

Complete College America identifies four "game changers" that have been proven nationally to increase the number of college degrees produced thereby altering the economy and improving the quality of life of its citizens.

Complete College RI: FOUR GAME CHANGER STRATEGIES

- Accelerating Time to Degree
- Predictable Schedules
- Guided Pathways to Success
- Strategic Funding

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A Pathway for
Public Higher Education in Rhode Island

A Commitment to Change…

Rhode Islanders know the importance of postsecondary education to the state's economic success. The recent establishment of the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner demonstrated the desire by state leaders for a clear and focused effort by our state's postsecondary resources to address the needs of the state and its citizens. Strong guidance regarding the role of this office to advance new approaches was provided through Article 20 passed during the 2014 legislative session. Higher education now must step up and become a committed partner in helping to shape a new future for Rhode Island—one that contains a thriving and growing economy and available jobs for a skilled workforce.

Higher education recognizes that increasing the pool of workers with higher skills also signifies helping to ensure the success of students including those who have rarely been successful in the past. This will be challenging work requiring a profound commitment to change. A three-part approach will advance us toward these goals: reportable metrics (because data means accountability and transparency of outcomes), alignment with current and emerging workforce needs, and implementing Complete College America's strategic actions. The proven best practices identified by the national Complete College America (CCA) movement offer a pathway to achieving this goal and boosting college completions. The key strategies, or game-changers, include accelerating time to degree through such approaches as block scheduling, remediation design, and guided pathways to success. Strategic funding is a statewide policy change that can focus campus efforts on desired outcomes.

Complete College Rhode Island will also call for the commitment and further support of leadership in this state. Accepting the challenge is the first step; taking action using and adapting the CCA framework will require the state to come together if it is to achieve a strong, vibrant economy.

The Game Changers for Rhode Island…

Accelerating Time to Degree

Establishing a student culture where full-time enrollment is at least 15 credits a semester or 30 credits over an academic year (including summers) is essential to on time (4-year) graduation. CCA recommends providing students incentives for enrolling in at least 15 credits a semester or 30 credits per academic year as well as restricting bachelor's degree programs to 120 credits and associate degree programs to 60 credits, with few exceptions. CCA recommends enrolling most students in college-level gateway courses and if underprepared, with mandatory, just-in-time instructional support or courses. They also recommend curricular redesign by combining reading and writing instruction and aligning mathematics to programs of study, including matching the curriculum to real-world career needs. Providing remedial help parallel to highly structured coursework eliminates remediation as a barrier to entry into college-level study.

Predictable Schedules

Helping working students balance jobs, family responsibilities and school by utilizing block scheduling of classes adds predictability to their busy lives and enables many more students to attend college full-time, shortening their time to completion. Graduating on time decreases the cost of the degree and decreases the time to employment. Offering more academic programs in block schedules will also improve time-to-degree and create a quality educational experience.

Guided Pathways to Success

Enrolling all students in highly structured degree plans, not individual courses, and mapping out every semester of study for the entire program keeps a student focused; it also compels the institution to provide courses when they are needed. An additional benefit of this approach is a better utilization of classrooms, faculty and related facilities. Building in early warning systems to alert advisors when students fall behind in their matriculation allows for more strategic intervention.

Strategic Funding

Using metrics that focus on campus initiatives and increasing student progression and completion keeps performance funding relevant. CCA and the National Governors' Association identified metrics to tie state funding to student progression through programs and completion of degrees and certificates, including financial incentives to encourage the success of low-income students and the production of graduates in high-demand fields. By including strategic goals as part of the base funding of an institution, it keeps state funding relevant and a driver of innovation and change on campus.

There is no time to waste. Rhode Island higher education must act to generate the graduates needed to fuel the economy. Starting now, for the future that we want for our state, we need to enact proven game changer strategies.

Although the smallest state in size, Rhode Island has a significant history of innovation beginning with being the birthplace of the industrial revolution in America. Starting with Roger Williams, innovative thinkers have made this state their home. No wonder the statue on the State House is of the Independent Man. And while the "Ocean State" has more than 400 miles of scenic coastline and areas of pristine beauty, we need more than the Lighthouse at Castle Hill to get our state back on course.

It is time for Rhode Island to reclaim its reputation for innovative thought and action. The challenges of the present and the future can only be met and overcome by a well-trained and educated population.

A data report prepared with Complete College America reveals that while there are improvements in some areas, others need to get much better quickly. For Rhode Island to be competitive, we need to produce more bachelor's degrees, associate degrees and postsecondary certificates, which mean achieving higher retention and graduation rates.

By 2020, 66% of jobs will require a career certificate or college degree; currently, only 43% of Rhode Island adults have an associate degree or higher.

While there is much work to be done, there is reason to believe these goals can be accomplished. Our community college, college, and university have already begun to implement some of the major ideas of Complete College America with notable success.

- URI has developed academic maps which are a term by term sequence of courses for each major that include all required courses and milestones needed to complete the degree in four years. Milestones include not only courses needed for on-time graduation, but also GPA requirements, pre-requisites, application processes, and advising recommendations such as internships, international study, and minors. The academic maps also include a narrative section that helps students to understand the nature of the major, including career information and any other policies that may impact satisfaction of all requirements. The maps provide transparent information for students, supports the work of advisors, and results in efficiencies in facilities management. The academic maps support the goal of on-time degree completion by providing an additional guidance and information tool.

- Rhode Island College developed an alternative version of the required four-credit First Year Writing (FYW) 100 course. Students who would otherwise place into the developmental writing course, were given the opportunity to take FYW 100Plus, a 6-credit, all-college-

credit course with two extra contact hours per week in a learning lab in a computer classroom. Some students who would normally place into FYW 100 elected to take FYW 100P instead as a way to bolster confidence in their writing skills. In an initial pilot study, 67% of students in the developmental English course passed, while 84% of 100P students achieved a good grade. In addition, students taking FYW 100Plus earned higher GPAs indicating these students were generally more successful. A comparable version of MATH 139, Contemporary Topics in Mathematics is being planned which allow students who otherwise would require a developmental mathematics course, to meet their general education mathematics requirement.

- The Community College of Rhode Island will be piloting block scheduling options in spring 2015. The college is setting up full-time MWF, TR, and weekend blocks that will include both developmental or college-level writing, developmental math, college success and a college-level course (typically a social science or business course). Given the large part-time student population, the college will have some part-time (6 credit blocks) during the day, evening and on weekends. The college will evaluate the outcomes during spring semester and tweak accordingly for the fall.

- Take 5, Finish in 4 is a URI initiative intended to change the mindset of students regarding credit attempts and completion; this initiative is introduced at new student orientation and is promoted throughout the year. Students are encouraged to take at least five courses (15 credits or more) each semester. This message is repeated to students and their families through social media, advising, in residence halls, in URI 101: Planning for Academic Success, and on tee shirts distributed at orientation . URI has also reduced the time allowed during which a student may drop a course, encouraging continuing effort at completion, rather than reduced course load. The university is in the process of deploying more professional advisors who can better monitor student progress and reach out to those who are not fully enrolled, as well as those who may need more academic support services. In 2014 URI launched its first new winter January J-term to help students stay on track, catch up, or get ahead. Incentives for using the winter term include reduced tuition and no additional charge for students living in campus housing. Since URI began implementing a strategic use of financial aid and these credit completion strategies, there has been a 15% increase in first year students earning 30 credits in their first year.

- Rhode Island College noticed that freshmen who begin as “undeclared” students graduate at a lower rate. The college has reduced to 45 credits the time before students must declare a major. Students have the option of declaring a major or a meta-major if they have identified an area of interest. Meta-major options include exploring arts, business, humanities, science/math or social and behavioral sciences. Academic maps, which guide students through a semester-by-semester sequence of courses, are being developed for the meta-majors and more popular majors.

- Recognizing the need to better integrate support in college-level writing gateway courses, the Community College of Rhode Island began piloting the ALP (Accelerated Learning

Program) co-requisite model in the fall 2014 semester. CCRI has worked extensively with experts from the Community College of Baltimore County to train CCRI faculty, revise curriculum and educate the college community about the advantages of this innovative approach. CCRI began piloting this approach in fall 2014 and plans to double the number of sections offered in spring 2015. Upon demonstrating the success of this model, the offerings will be further expanded in fall 2015.

Hope is the Rhode Island state motto and higher education is already showing there are reasons to be optimistic that these goals can and will be accomplished. But as many other states have come to realize, it requires more than small improvements or model programs. This is a time for bold, strategic, and systemic change. Thirty-three states have embraced the Complete College America Game Changers; now, Rhode Island needs to act rather than observe from the sidelines. In partnership with workforce development, business, and other Rhode Island offices and agencies, public higher education will work to adopt all of these strategies and fully execute them in our state. The only question remaining is if the winds of change will billow our sails on an exciting new venture or will we allow ourselves to miss this critical opportunity to move forward.

Accelerating Time to Degree

Students' Voice: ***"I need a degree to get a good job and can't afford to take five or six years to accomplish it."***

The goal is to ensure that students make continued and steady progress toward earning a degree. Too many students begin college only to get discouraged and drop out. What are the obstacles and what can we do to help more students reach the finish line? How can we change the paradigm so that the time needed to earn a degree is decreased for Rhode Island students?

How we support students that are not academically prepared for college-level work must change. Too many dollars and too much time are going into developmental courses. Students, discouraged by having to take courses that don't count toward their degree, drop out at high rates. Postsecondary education must not only enroll students, but support their success to degree as well.

The more time it takes for students to complete their degrees, the more expensive it is for students, their families, and the taxpayers. And, the longer it takes to complete a degree, the more challenging it is for students who work and/or have families to focus on their education. What strategies can Rhode Island undertake to help insure that students are able to complete what they started?

Do the math: if fulltime students can take 15-18 credits per semester and 6 over the summer, graduating with an associate degree in 2 years and a bachelor's degree in 4 years will be commonplace.

Recommendations

- Expand access to dual enrollment programs for students who, with appropriate advice from guidance counselors and college advisors, can jumpstart their college careers by earning college credits while in high school.

- Degrees requiring extra credits result in additional time and have additional costs. Reduce the number of unnecessary, excess credits and maintain credit limits on bachelor's degrees to 120 credits and associate degrees to 60 credits for most majors. Cap certificate programs at 18 to 22 credits.

- Make transfer credit count by decreasing the number of excess credits that transfer students routinely have by the time they graduate by establishing a common core of general education and common prerequisites for majors. Develop common first-level courses for popular transfer majors. By having a general education core and the common major prerequisites, the majority of transfer students will be able to transfer in as juniors.

- Provide incentives for students to earn 30 credits over an academic year either by taking 15 credits per semester or by taking courses over the summer. Students who stay on track are much more likely to graduate on time.

- Make college-level coursework the "default placement." For those students needing support, establish mandatory attendance in tutorial sessions or extend the course time providing additional hours focused on areas requiring remediation.

Predictable Schedules

Students' Voice: ***"I work full-time and go to school as well as have family responsibilities at home. Course schedules don't account for this."***

To reach the goal of more college graduates we want to ensure that students make continued and steady progress toward the degree. Block schedules establish classes in set time periods so students can plan accordingly. For example, if students know that all of their classes will be from 8:00 AM to noon, they can schedule their work hours or meet family needs accordingly.

Block schedules provide predictability in a college education, giving students the opportunity to plan for work and family obligations and decreasing the likelihood of missed classes and dropping out.

Recommendations

- Develop block schedules for selected programs and assess outcomes; request institutions to identify which certificate and degree programs are the best candidates for such scheduling.

- Map out block scheduling for whole programs of study, creating student cohorts. This allows the opportunity for working groups and learning communities to emerge providing student-to-student support.

Guided Pathways to Success

Students' Voice: ***"I was glad that a road map through my first two years of college was basically handed to me through the JAA [Joint Admissions Agreement] program. College is a different setting compared to high school, and choosing gen eds [general education courses] that will count toward a degree and that will transfer is nerve-racking. More students need such guidance and support."***

With countless options in choosing majors and in selecting courses, it is understandable why too many students get off track and end up graduating with more credits than they need. There are too many choices and too little guidance. With too many choices, the decisions become more difficult. The advisor-to-student ratio and the complexity of student lives make the traditional advising model less than effective. Additionally, students don't always take advantage of the advising that is available, relying only on peer support.

Uncertainty about careers and majors also often leads to excess credits. Establishing highly structured degree programs with guided pathways or maps showing semester-by-semester course sequencing and milestone courses keeps students on track to graduation without extra courses. By scheduling students on a pathway for their major or meta-major (disciplinary area, such as science/technology, for students not yet committed to a specific major), students are guided onto a path that will direct them toward the right courses at the right times. The institutions benefit from degree mapping in gaining a more accurate knowledge of course and facilities needs.

The Student Access & Persistence Program (APP), facilitated by the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner, supports college enrollment and persistence to degree of traditionally underserved students using federal College Access Challenge Grant funds to support Connect to College (C2C) at CCRI, Learning for Life (L4L) at RIC and RELAAY at URI. Central to this work is providing advising and strategic interventions early based on individual student needs. Core

program components include: establishing strategic partnerships with college access organizations serving nontraditional students; delivering blended, comprehensive, student-centered services (e.g., academic assistance, counseling, and financial planning); and ensuring satisfactory progress of students toward degree completion.

The Joint Admission Agreement (JAA) Transition Plans provide students with a guided pathway for over 60 majors at RIC or URI. Students participating in the Joint Admissions Agreement program rank the JAA Transition Plans, which map a program of study, as the first reason they would recommend the program. JAA Transition Plans are models for additional and alternate transfer paths from the community college to the bachelor's degree.

Aligning higher education with workforce needs means inviting business, industry and technology to be true partners in the higher education of their future employees. This translates as greater involvement of business in advisory boards that contribute to mapping pathways, thus providing assurance to students and employers alike that graduates will be appropriately prepared.

Recommendations

- Promote academic mapping at each of Rhode Island's public postsecondary institutions. Ensure clear academic maps are provided that list sequentially courses required for a specific major each semester and include milestone courses. Milestone courses are those that should be taken at a specific time in a student's academic career, and gateway courses are the first-level math and English courses that are prerequisites for more advanced coursework.

- Guide students unable to commit to a specific major to a meta-major in an area of interest (which is not as specific as a major). Roadmaps for a meta-major allow students to take introductory courses in a widely defined discipline and would enable them to develop a specific major without having "wasted" excess credits on courses that are not related to degree requirements.

- Coordinate maps for associate degrees at the community college with maps established at the baccalaureate institutions. Community college maps would show the first two years of study for majors offered at RIC or URI.

- Promote the Joint Admissions Agreement (JAA) and other articulated transfer pathways as efficient transfer options for students transitioning to RIC and URI from CCRI. Students who transition through JAA graduate from CCRI with an associate degree and 60 credits applicable to the bachelor's degree. Students are also eligible for a 10-30% tuition discount at RIC or URI.

- Expand existing coordinated support services that include intrusive advising, academic tutoring, and career services such as those provided through the Access & Persistence

Programs. This is particularly important if Rhode Island is to increase access to and through college for historically under-served students.

Strategic Funding

Students' Voice: ***"I can't afford to go to college or finish my degree!"***

According to a recent article in the Providence Journal, "Rhode Island ranks 5th in the nation for the amount of debt students accumulated to earn a bachelor's degree." We can make getting a degree attainable for more students promoting on time degree completion and using state funds to achieve strategic goals.

Students' ability to complete their degree on time not only is impacted by available financial aid, it also is influenced by institutional policies or procedures. Complete College America recommends funding built into the institutions' base budget that also is based on such factors as credit accumulation and degree completion. Funding must give equal value to the important objectives of college access, academic progress, and success to degree.

Resources must be used to maximize an effective and efficient public higher education system that provides accessible, quality education for Rhode Island citizens and is an engine in driving the state's economy.

Recommendations

- Create structures which promote students' on time degree completion.
- Examine performance-funding models used nationally (such as in Tennessee, Ohio, and Indiana).
- Identify desired student success metrics including those developed by Complete College America and establish incentives for achieving those metrics in institutions' base funding.

Moving Forward

The postsecondary community is excited about the full implementation of this new initiative that will advance higher education for Rhode Island. It will be in the fidelity of the implementation of Complete College America strategies tailored for Rhode Island that will make this initiative a success.

Works consulted
The Game Changers, Complete College America, October 2013.
Johnson, Nate. *Three Policies to Reduce Time to Degree*, Complete College America, February 2011.
Guided Pathways to Success: Boosting College Completion, Complete College America, Winter 2012.