An Introduction to RI's College Access and Persistence Programs

Essential Question: What do we know about historically underserved populations on RI public college campuses and recent efforts to support them?

To improve higher education degree completion rates, the Rhode Island Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner (RIOPC) has launched three new programs that partner with existing college access efforts.
Introduction: RI's public colleges expand efforts to retain "historically underserved" students

Nationally, as in Rhode Island, certain groups of students have been disproportionately under-represented on college campuses. Minority youth, students with special needs and especially those who've been raised in poverty find that college is out of reach for them.

Therefore **Access and Persistence Programs** have emerged and evolved. They help students gain **access** to college by supporting stronger guidance counseling and mentoring during the K-12 school years, demystifying the tangle of college applications and financial forms, and more. Once the student has gained access, these programs help students receive comprehensive services to help students **persist**, to weather the challenges to academic success, until they have a college diploma in hand.

This story examines the new programs that RI's three public colleges have recently implemented, building on existing efforts. While they're new, are they beginning to have a positive impact? If so, what seems to be working?
To become economically stronger, RI needs more college graduates

Nationally, RI's neighbor, Massachusetts, has the highest proportion of postsecondary degree attainment. And even that state is almost 10 percentage points below the estimated need. MA has led the nation in K-12 achievement for the last decade and is home to a wealth of higher educational institutions. While that state also struggles to reach adequate college access and completion rates, it launched the Vision Project to aggressively increase postsecondary degree attainment.

Particularly worrisome for Rhode Island is that the proportion of all adults with degrees is the same as those of young adults (43%), ages 25 to 34, who are the best indicator of the state’s future workforce. Helping those older than 30 to finish their degrees is important, but systematically boosting the degree-completion rates among young people will yield the most robust long-term results.

The Lumina Foundation’s report A Stronger Nation Through Higher Education explores the estimated need for future postsecondary degree attainment and how states currently measure up.
Who are Rhode Island's historically underserved students?

These are RI's public-education students. Better serving those who have been historically underserved will best help the state boost post-secondary training and degree completion.

This story focuses on students from the high school graduating class of 2012. This was the first group of students to have access to the new programs at RI’s three public colleges which launched in 2012. We will learn more about these programs as the story progresses. Please note that many of the students represented above are duplicates since one student can be male, low-income, minority, and attend an urban school.

To see a glossary of terms for the graph above, click here.
What are some of the barriers to college enrollment?

There are many factors, such as **chronic absenteeism**, that are highly predictive of low college enrollment and persistence.

Other barriers students face when enrolling and persisting in college include, but are by no means limited to:

- **Finances** -- the family's ability to pay or access grants and scholarships
- **Family obligations** -- some students are already parents themselves or care for ailing, aged or young family members
- **Counseling** -- high-school guidance counselors, who often have extremely high case loads, are not always able to offer adequate college-going support
- **High residential mobility** -- students whose families move residences frequently often have profound gaps in their education that are neither identified nor remediated
- **Inadequate K-12 preparation** -- students whom schools have matriculated but who have not met the grade-level expectations can't meet college expectations or they give up and drop out before high-school graduation.
High-school graduates are far more likely to attend college if they don't have any of our focus characteristics.

The College Access and Persistence Programs work to change the educational trajectory of students who have the characteristics traditionally associated with low-college enrollment rates. This chart looks at college enrollment for the class of 2012 in the fall immediately following their high school graduation.

This story concentrates on the three new college based access and persistence programs (Connect to College at CCRI, Learning for Life at RIC, Project Recruit & Educate Local At-risk Adults & Youth at URI) and two of the established pre-college access programs they work with (College Visions and The College Crusade of Rhode Island).

Note: Enrollment data is from the National Student Clearinghouse which covers 98% of all students.
The College Crusade and College Visions: Examples of two vital programs

These mature programs work specifically with the groups who most struggle with getting to and succeeding in college.

Because the difficulties related to college access and completion often begin during the K-12 years, College Visions and The College Crusade of Rhode Island start their work early in the academic lives of their students.

**The College Crusade of Rhode Island (CC)**
Founded in 1989, The College Crusade annually provides college-readiness services and scholarships to approximately 3,900 students who are attending middle and high schools in low-income RI urban districts. Read more about The College Crusade.

**College Visions (CV)**
Since 2004, College Visions has provided low-income and first-generation youth in Rhode Island with the individualized advisory and resources needed to enroll and succeed in college. Read more about College Visions.

*Note: Values of -1 represent data that have been suppressed to protect student confidentiality.*
"My mother always told me, “Get good grades and you will do well in life.” However, my mother never spoke to me about college specifically until my brother entered high school. And even then she never spoke about the logistics, only that I should focus on making college my goal. When my friend suggested joining The College Crusade, I told my mother and she jumped at the chance to get me thinking about college."

--Anthony Agudelo (College Crusade and RIC L4L)
At 62%, CC and CV students enrolled in college at a similar rate following high school as compared to more traditionally-represented students from the Class of 2012. These "all remaining students," who were not participants in CC or CV and were not part of our underserved populations, enrolled at a rate of 64%. Both groups contrast starkly to the 45% of "non-participant peers" who enrolled immediately following high school graduation. These students did not participate in CC or CV, but are from core urban communities and/or were eligible for subsidized lunch (a poverty indicator). We use these two characteristics to identify our underserved population. More than half of these students did not enroll in a postsecondary institution following high school and could potentially benefit most from the targeted support provided by the college access and persistence programs highlighted in this story.

These data do not specify whether students are enrolling with the intention of earning a degree or merely to take a course or two. We do know that nearly 80% of students initially enrolled on a full-time basis.
High-school participants of College Visions (CV) and The College Crusade (CC) make up a large portion of the participants in the new, college-based support programs, about 20% the first year and 38% the second year -- a smooth, promising hand-off.

Using a federal College Access Challenge Grant, the Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner is providing resources for each of RI’s public colleges to establish strong partnerships with existing college access organizations such as CV and CC and develop coordinated, student-centered support services. These new Access and Persistence Programs (APP) are described on the next slide.

Though in this story we are focusing on students who graduated in 2012, the entire inaugural group of APP participants included both first-time freshmen as well as adult students. Including the adult students, the total number of students served in the first year by institution were CCRI: 77; RIC: 118; URI: 683. By the second year these numbers had changed to 162, 217, and 601, respectively.

Other college-based support programs exist, but here we focus on these three new ones.
Introducing RI's Access & Persistence Programs

Overwhelmingly, participating students are low-income and from urban communities.

The College Access and Persistence Programs, by institution:

Connect to College (C2C) at Community College of Rhode Island: Centralizing critical services, C2C assigns Coordinators to every participant and provides wrap-around support to address individual student needs. Read more about C2C.

Learning for Life (L4L) at Rhode Island College: This program offers a broad-range of academic, financial, and social-support services designed to address potential obstacles to college persistence for both at-risk college-age students and adult learners. Read more about L4L.

Project Recruit & Educate Local At-risk Adults & Youth (Project RELAAY) at the University of Rhode Island: Aiming to boost the number of minority students graduating within six years, RELAAY serves both traditionally under-represented students and older adults who already have some college-level education. Read more about Project RELAAY.

Data note: Our story captures only the incoming freshmen. Upper class and older students, who make up an especially large portion of the L4L program, are not included.
"When I got to CCRI I was terrified. With all the deadlines and emails I was quickly overwhelmed. There was no one around to help me but my friends and they had tons of things to do already. I went looking for help, but quickly found out that counseling was not nearly what it was in high school. But I then found C2C and was set up with a C2C coordinator. C2C was amazing; it was like having a Crusade Advisor for college."

--Kenny Luis Recio (College Crusade and CCRI C2C)
Program association with students’ persistence in course completion

On average, program-supported students complete course credits at a significantly higher rate than low-income peers, as well as the general student population.

The credit completion ratio compares the number of credits a student attempted to the number of credits completed. In other words, do students complete the classes they start? Program participants completed 85% of all the classes in which they enrolled. Clearly, strategic, coordinated support is making a difference.

It should be noted that students taking pre-freshman summer courses improve their overall first-year outcomes. The influence of this summer running start on subsequent course completion and on-time graduation needs further study.

As a reminder, "non-participant peers" are students who are from core urban communities and/or were eligible for subsidized lunch, but did not participate in one of the three access and persistence programs. "All remaining students" did not participate in one of the three programs and were not part of our underserved populations.
More than their low-income peers, program participants earned grades that kept them in good academic standing. Over 80% of program participants had at least a 2.0.

Inadequate GPAs create additional barriers to student persistence. Students can lose their financial aid and some majors even have specific GPA requirements to stay in the program. In addition, consequences occur for students whose GPAs are lower than 2.0. URI puts students on academic probation for the following semester and RIC does not consider students with such GPAs for graduation.

Data Note: Across all colleges, students have no recorded GPA at all if they enrolled exclusively in non-credit bearing, developmental courses. Developmental courses are not credit-bearing, meaning they do not count towards a degree or towards a GPA.
Students' intended academic paths after the first year

Program participants enroll in challenging STEM fields at far higher rates than their non-participant peers, but also more than students in general.

Nationally, the new, so-called "Knowledge Economy" is demanding far more workers with STEM credentials than the institutions of higher education are currently granting. Therefore, the RI Access and Persistence programs are also tracking their ability to help non-traditional students not only persist, but choose and complete these valuable degrees.

Broadly, STEM majors include engineering, health, animal science or mathematics. Industry-specific STEM tracks include such areas as computer software engineering, pharmaceutics and drug design, poultry science, and statistics. To see a full definition of all majors included in the STEM category, click here.

General Studies majors are studying to have a broader understanding of all the arts and sciences. All three public postsecondary institutions in RI offer this track, but it is most popular at CCRI.
"After the first semester of college, I told my College Visions advisor about my experience. She supported me in growing as a college student and doing a better job. She encouraged me to keep my head held high, and helped me focus on the next semester and to try harder for what I actually wanted. Then in the spring of 2013, I was introduced to my RELAAY advisor, which completed my network of support for college. Seeing that I was doing better than before made me continue wanting to do better."

--Kayla Paulino (College Visions and URI RELAAY)
Fully 87% of program participants persisted into their second year, as compared with 59% of their low-income peers or 77% of all other students enrolled.

The first year of data suggest that the traditionally underserved students in these programs are overcoming their challenges to college persistence. Following this inaugural group of students, we see that they are persisting at a higher rate than both of the other groups of students.

The preliminary conclusion: these programs are working and are making a difference for Rhode Island’s underserved students.

*Note: These data continue to represent students from the graduating class of 2012 who enrolled in one of the three public in-state institutions. This includes both full- and part-time students.*
Take-aways and Recommendations (1st of 2 pages)

Clearly, partnerships among college access and postsecondary support programs successfully smooth students’ transition to college and coordinating comprehensive services while in college enhances their chances for success.

• Strengthening the coordination of efforts across programs and levels would continue to greatly enhance their efficacy.

• Coordinating comprehensive systems of support, especially during the vulnerable transition from high school to college, needs good longitudinal data. Such data will help all partners work together to achieve their common goals for student success.

• Already further study is needed to identify which core services and institutional policies are having the greatest impact on these students. For example, how do the pre-college summer courses impact GPAs, credit accumulation and on-time graduation?

• To be strategic about providing the best services to students, the college support programs must measure their impacts and outcomes continuously.
Take-aways and Recommendations (2\textsuperscript{nd} of 2 pages)

• Identify other related programs that might be interested in participating in these longitudinal studies. Sharing these results among programs would further expand and improve services for students.

• Sustaining the program-supports over the course of some student's college careers will be essential to ensure that they reach completion.

• Since many more students could benefit from these comprehensive services, expanding and sustaining the programs’ success will require finding other sources of funding.
View the full, interactive version of this data story online:
http://ridatahub.org/datastories/ris-college-access-and-persistence-programs/