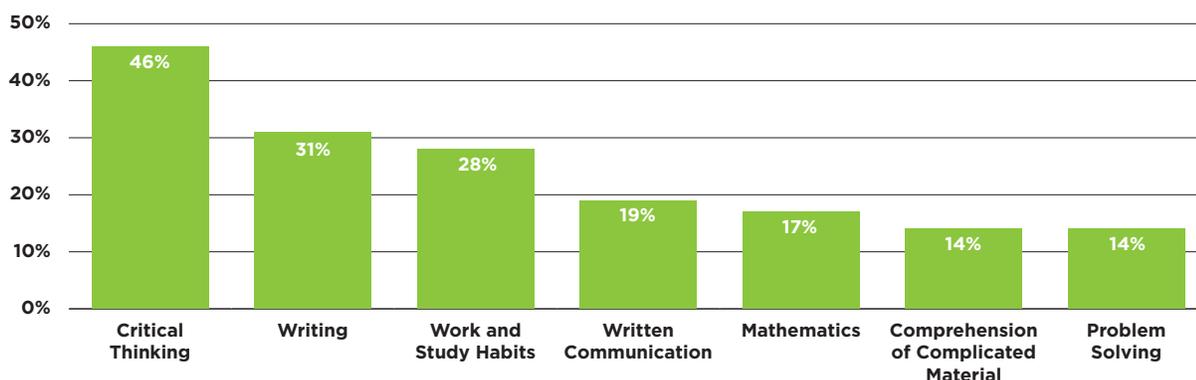


# Preparing Students for College and Career: Rhode Island Higher Education Leader Perspectives

## College and Career Readiness Skills That College Faculty Most Value



Source: *Rising to the challenge: Views on high school graduates' preparedness for college and careers*. (2015). Retrieved February 27, 2018, from [www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org). (Note: Question asked "In which ONE or TWO areas, if any, do you most wish U.S. public high schools were doing a better job of preparing their students for the expectations of college/the work world?")

A recent national survey conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies found that college faculty believe that, as a whole, public high schools are not adequately preparing high school graduates to meet the expectations they will face in college and in the workforce. In particular, college faculty wished that public schools better prepared students in terms of critical thinking, writing, work and study habits, written communication, mathematics, comprehension of complicated material, and problem solving.<sup>1</sup>

Adopting student-centered learning practices can help students develop meaningful relationships with adults inside and outside of school, increase engagement and achievement for students from a variety of backgrounds, and ensure that students graduate from high school with the important social/emotional, executive function, problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration skills, and strong work habits that are essential for success in college and careers.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup> For these reasons, nationally and in Rhode Island, we are seeing a move toward student-centered learning – learning that is personalized, competency-based, can happen anytime and anywhere, and allows students to take ownership over their own learning.

This report presents findings from interviews with Rhode Island higher education leaders. These interviews were designed to assess how student-centered learning practices being implemented in Rhode Island are helping (or could help) prepare students for success in college and careers.

### Interviewees included:

- **Julian Alssid**, Vice President of Workforce Development, Community College of Rhode Island
- **Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier**, Commissioner of Postsecondary Education, State of Rhode Island
- **Dr. Julie Horwitz**, Interim-Co-Dean, Rhode Island College School of Education
- **Dr. Jason L. Meriwether**, Vice President for Student Success, Rhode Island College
- **Jamie E. Scurry**, Vice President, University College, Roger Williams University
- **Dr. Anne Seitsinger**, Interim Associate Dean and Professor, University of Rhode Island Allan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies

## Classroom Learning Combined with Real World Learning Leads to Student Success

The higher education leaders interviewed agree that hands-on and work-based learning experiences combined with classroom learning can best prepare students for success in college and career.

According to Julian Alssid, Vice President of Workforce Development at Community College of Rhode Island, today's jobs, "require workers to have both a solid academic grounding and an ability to apply oneself to keep learning in a technology driven world." Work experiences are crucial for students because business leaders are looking to hire people who have solid professional and academic skills. Today's workers, Alssid says, need to be able to work in teams, solve problems, and apply reading, writing, math skills, and technical skills.

"For so many of us the best way to figure out what you want and don't want to do in life is to try things," Alssid says. He sees work experiences and apprenticeships as a critical component of secondary and postsecondary education.

Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier, Commissioner of Postsecondary Education calls PrepareRI "a very important initiative for the State of Rhode Island to make sure that students are prepared for postsecondary education and employment through the lens of having high-quality career pathways that span secondary and postsecondary education."

## A New Approach to Education Will Require Collaboration

Schools across Rhode Island are creating new models of learning to meet the changing needs of students and our economy. Innovative approaches to education will require collaboration among secondary and postsecondary schools and employers.

Alssid believes that the education we provide in our schools needs to adapt to prepare students for the changing needs of our economy and changes in our workforce. He says, "To build a collaborative and innovative workforce, we need to develop or adapt innovative, relevant curriculum that brings together employers and academics."

A shift in our education system will require intensive collaboration. "No one partner can do this alone," Alssid says. Instead of working in isolation, teachers and faculty members need to be in regular communication with workforce leaders to make sure that they are preparing students to do and manage the jobs that employers will be looking to fill."

Jamie E. Scurry, Vice President, University College, Roger Williams University, thinks that it is time for school, community, and business leaders to redefine "new talent development models, new business models, and new forms of collaboration." For example, she says that dual enrollment, in which high school students can take classes at many of Rhode Island's colleges and universities while receiving both college and high school credit, "is taking off in real and meaningful ways and is here to stay."



### PrepareRI

PrepareRI launched in 2016 after Rhode Island was awarded a New Skills for Youth grant from JPMorgan Chase and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). PrepareRI is a strategic partnership among the Rhode Island state government, private industry leaders, the public education system, universities, and nonprofits across the state. This collaboration was undertaken to help prepare all Rhode Island youth with the skills they need for jobs that pay. Many of the goals of PrepareRI are aligned with student-centered learning and focused on providing students with personalized learning opportunities that address their skills, knowledge, needs, interests, and aspirations and allow them to pursue their own pathways.

PrepareRI's goals are that by 2020:

- All career pathway programs will be **aligned to Rhode Island's high-demand career fields**
- All high school students will have access to a **work-based learning experience**, such as an internship in a relevant career field
- All students, starting no later than middle school, will have **career exploration opportunities** and **individualized learning plans** based on their unique strengths and interests
- Over half of high school students will **graduate with college credit or an industry credential**
- Over half of high school students will **participate in career and technical education (CTE)**

Source: PrepareRI. (n.d.). *Prepare Rhode Island*. Retrieved August 17, 2018, from [www.prepare-ri.org](http://www.prepare-ri.org)

## Colleges Teach Using Student-Centered Practices

Scurry says “Learning needs to be transformational and focus on positive self-development for students of all ages.” She works to ensure that her faculty and adjunct professors, who are experts in their fields, provide students the opportunities to make connections between theory and practice. The key to rigorous and engaging learning, according to Scurry, is to develop culturally relevant and interdisciplinary curriculum that enables students to “ask their own questions and pursue their own curiosities.” The relationship between working and learning is not an “on-off process.” She says, it is “important to think about synergy and translate internship and work-based experiences back into the classroom.”

Allsid says that at CCRI it is especially important to connect first-generation college students to workplace connections that provide access to career pathways.

Dr. Jason L. Meriwether, Vice President for Student Success at Rhode Island College, similarly values the chance for RIC students to apply what they are learning in the classroom to the real world. He says the internship experience at RIC is not only beneficial to RIC students but also benefits employers. Ninety-seven percent of companies that host RIC interns return the following year for additional student interns.

## Changing Landscape of Teacher Training Programs

Teacher preparation programs across the country are shifting their pedagogical approaches to better prepare teachers to implement student-centered learning practices in their own classrooms.

Dr. Julie Horwitz, Interim-Co-Dean of the Rhode Island College (RIC) School of Education, has been working with community and school leaders across Rhode Island to redesign the school. As part of this redesign work, the RIC School of Education received a grant from the Rhode Island Office of Innovation to partner with the Highlander Institute to “look at personalized learning through an academic lens.” Through this work, RIC faculty will further develop and share best practices in personalized and blended learning in their college-level courses. Horwitz says, “Teacher prep across the country needs to teach the way we want students to teach in the field.”

Scurry says that education systems tend to be reactive, and it’s time to be proactive. “We need to look ahead and consider in 30 years how will cognition be developing? What will families need? How can we develop systems and solutions that have an eye forward rather than an eye back?” She believes that we need to think differently about the relationship between faculty members and middle and high school teachers and that this could lead to an entirely new model of teacher preparation.



## Recommendations for Redesigning Teacher Preparatory Programs to Support Student-Centered Learning

In 2017, Teach Plus launched the Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellowship which allows teachers from across the state to study and advocate for personalized learning policies.

In 2018, Rhode Island’s Teach Plus Policy Fellows released a policy brief with their recommendations for successful statewide implementation of personalized learning. One of their primary recommendations was that Rhode Island “rethink and revise teacher preparation and professional learning for educators to support student-centered teaching and provide incentives and supports to encourage this shift.”

The Teach Plus Fellows recommend that teacher preparatory programs instruct teachers in the use of:

- Social-emotional learning
- Cultural competency
- Using data to inform practice
- Technology and blended learning
- Project-based learning through in-school and community-based projects and internships

Source: 2017-18 Teach Plus Rhode Island Teaching Policy Fellows. (2018). *Rhode Island Teach Plus Policy Fellows’ perspective on personalized learning and recommendations for successful statewide implementation*. Boston, MA: Teach Plus.

## Competency-Based Learning and College Readiness

In 2016, the New England Board of Higher Education and the New England Secondary School Consortium convened a meeting of admissions leaders from colleges and universities across New England to address questions some students and parents had about whether proficiency-based learning and grading might put students at a disadvantage in the college application and admission process. Since then, 75 colleges and universities across New England, including all three public higher education institutions in Rhode Island, have signed onto a statement of support for proficiency-based education stating that students with proficiency-based grades and transcripts will not be disadvantaged during the admissions process.<sup>6,7</sup>

According to Alssid, competency-based teaching and learning is a key tool to ensure that students' learning is tied to workforce requirements. The "purest form of competency is one that disengages learning from the seat time requirements," Alssid says. This can be "hard to do in a traditional school environment," that is required to be open and closed at certain times of day and for certain months. A more gradual approach to competency-based learning can still have an impact if teachers and workforce leaders collaborate to co-design the skills and knowledge students need to master to become successful both in the classroom and workplace.



### Recommendations

- Offer both high school and college students a rigorous and engaging curriculum that connects academic learning to students' career goals and aspirations.
- Give high school students opportunities to acquire the critical thinking, problem solving, and communications skills they need to be successful in college and careers by providing all students the opportunity to learn outside of the traditional classroom on college campuses and in the community.
- Support new and continued collaborations among public school districts, public and private colleges, and employers needed to develop and implement relevant and engaging curriculum and internships that connect academic learning to students' career aspirations.
- Revamp teacher preparation programs and professional development opportunities to provide educators the information and tools they need to implement student-centered learning.



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