
PK-16

*Partnerships for Success
Research Brief*

**COLLEGE ACCESS
IN RHODE ISLAND**

*Admission Officer and
Secondary School
Counselor Perspectives*

Rhode Island
Campus Compact

INTRODUCTION

Improving college access and completion is a key issue in Rhode Island. The College Board reports the state's collective college completion rate is 43.9% (2012). In a recent issue brief by Rhode Island KIDS COUNT (JUNE 30, 2013), data suggested that students from low-income families, minority students, and first-generation college students are more likely to attend college when they have the proper information, education, and support system.

Secondary school counselors and college Admission Officers are a current and potential pillar of this type of support. The following report explores the potential opportunities for partnerships between school counselors and Admission Officers as well as the current barriers that are in place that inhibit college access support for students in Rhode Island.

*Rhode Island Campus
Compact strengthens the
collective commitment and
capacity of colleges and
universities to advance civic
and community engagement
in order to fulfill the public
purpose of higher education.*

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METHOD

During the spring of 2013, Rhode Island Campus Compact, through the support of the RI Office of Higher Education and the College Access Challenge Grant, conducted a series of interviews with Admission Officers and School Counselors in Rhode Island. A total of eight interviews were conducted and transcribed and an additional three Admission Officers and secondary school counselors were asked to review the data and verify the results. Interviews were deliberately conducted with a diverse set of professionals working at different schools in different areas of the state. Through a standardized series of questions, those interviewed were asked to comment on the following themes:

- 1) Barriers and opportunities for greater access to higher education for Rhode Island secondary school students
- 2) The promise of partnerships: 1) Existing and potential partnerships between schools and colleges in Rhode Island and 2) Potential partnerships between Admission and Secondary School Counselors
- 3) Professional development to increase knowledge and skills for college access

RESULTS

THEME ONE

BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR GREATER ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR RHODE ISLAND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Secondary School Counselors and College Admission Officers serve a unique roll at their perspective institutions and can provide important views on students' readiness for college. Both sets of professionals spoke extensively about barriers to student success and ways in which Rhode island schools and colleges may better support students in high school and their transition to college.

Admission officers reported on:

- **Financial barriers to higher education**
Interviewees spoke about the financial limitations the students they work with from Rhode Island face, with particular emphasis placed on students from urban districts. They expressed frustration about students who would be great fits at their institutions but could not afford the tuition and fees. They also noted concerns that students and their families lack an adequate understanding of the financial aid process, including knowledge of the necessary applications (FAFSA & CSS Profile) as well as awareness of essential financial aid deadlines.
- **Lack of preparedness and academic foundation for college admission and success**
Interviewees discussed their concern about the lack of preparedness of the students they are trying to recruit to their institutions. They explained that often students they are reviewing for admission do not meet institutional admission criteria. They expressed a concern that some students coming from Rhode Island high schools lack the necessary academic foundation to be successful at their institution.

"...I can't stand to continue to stand in front of a classroom at an urban high school and get those kids excited and have 22 kids apply to my institutions, the top 22 in the class, and list my name as the reason they applied, and then reject 21 of the 22 and then have the one that I didn't reject can't afford to come..."

- **Lack of understanding among students and Secondary Counselors about impact of high school's curriculum choices on future academic options**
The Admission Officers interviewed spoke about how often they review an applicant who does not have basic required core courses for admission at their institution. They also stated that often students do not have the required courses for specific major requirements (especially in the STEM disciplines).
- **Concern about the validity of the Rhode Island high school transcript, including rigor of courses and evaluative measures**
Interviewees expressed a lack of confidence in transcripts accurately representing a student's academic ability. Additionally, worry was expressed over the reliability of the rigor of courses at some schools, with a specific concern on the consistency and strength of AP courses. Justification for concerns was found in incidents of students attending their institutions and not being able to place into the expected level of courses.
- **A need for the conversation about college preparation to begin at the middle schools**
Interviewees spoke about the need for conversations about college to begin earlier in a student's academic career to assist students in selecting appropriate college preparatory curriculum. Additionally, they believe it could assist with motivation levels for the students, particularly in the 9th and 10th grades.

"I think that there may be an opportunity that is missed when students are making that transition from middle school to high school to understand truly the foundation that they are building in their academic careers to prepare them for access and success..."

—Admission Officer

Secondary school counselors on barriers and opportunities for greater college access:

- **Lack of awareness among students and families that college preparation needs to begin before the senior year**
Secondary school counselors spoke about how they believe students and their families do not begin college preparation or planning until too late in their high school careers. Those interviewed expressed a belief that college planning should be an ongoing conversation throughout a student's high school career but that it is often not on a student's radar until the fall of their senior year.

"I think that one of the major reasons [students are not being successful in their college search] is that families and their students don't realize that it is a four year plan rather than I am deciding in November of my senior year that I am going to go to college. Their transcript, activities, and grades end up closing some doors."

- A need for college counseling to begin in the middle schools**
 Many counselors discussed the need for the students they work with to have conversations about college before they reach high school. They posited that having these important conversations with students before they reached the high school would allow students to get a jump start on course selection and get students thinking about themselves as college bound.
- Lack of time during the school day to discuss college goals**
 For those interviewed, no dedicated time exists to meet with students during the school day and address college planning. Interviewees stated that this has become increasingly difficult as teachers are less likely to afford them class time with new state curriculum standards.
- First generation parents are harder to engage in the college search process**
 Interviewees discussed the difficulty of engaging parents in the college search process, especially first generation parents. They expressed frustration with this because they felt that families are an essential part of creating a college going culture at their schools. Additionally, they expressed the importance of families understanding college costs and financial aid.
“Even though we try to make the family contact and be the resource for them I think for some families they don’t believe that the student is anything more than a high school graduate.”
- The Promise of Partnerships in Rhode Island**
 Creating formal PK-16 partnerships can be an effective strategy to build student success and college access among schools and colleges in Rhode Island. Admission Officers and Secondary School Counselors spoke about the opportunities and barriers to creating partnerships in their work.

- Difficulty sustaining partnerships due to high turnover at K-12 level**
 Admission Officers expressed that it is difficult to create and sustain partnerships due to the high turnover at the K-12 level, specifically in working with temporary counselors who are at a school for less than two years and keeping up with the opening and closing of charter secondary schools.
- A desire for targeted interaction with students rather than large scale programs**
 Interviewees expressed a desire to work more one-on-one with students who had the potential to attend their institutions. They also stated that they felt that large scale programs presented to an entire senior class and college fairs were not always the most efficient use of their time.
“If we had the opportunity to meet with students, learn about them, look at their transcripts early on, identify a few students, and then have a real visit plan then it could actually turn into something that does benefit everyone.”
- The challenge of partnering with community based organizations**
 Admission Officers noted that working with community based organizations can be difficult logistically and does not always directly correlate with their assigned job duties. They also expressed that even students working with community based organizations were often not eligible to be admitted to their institutions.
- A need for more programs that allow high school students to earn college credit**
 Interviewees suggested that students taking college courses while enrolled in high school would be effective for two reasons. Firstly, dual enrollment would allow students to show colleges that they are capable of college level work. Second, high school students earning college credit through a postsecondary institution would provide Admission Officers with greater insight into a student’s academic ability and potential.

THEME TWO

THE PROMISE OF PARTNERSHIPS IN RHODE ISLAND

Creating formal PK-16 partnerships can be an effective strategy to build student success and college access among schools and colleges in Rhode Island. Admission Officers and Secondary School Counselors spoke about the opportunities and barriers to creating partnerships in their work.

Admission officer interview:

- Limited incentives for creating partnerships**
 The interviewees stated that there are few incentives for creating partnerships with secondary schools or community based organizations. They expressed that they are not charged with creating partnerships nor are they evaluated on their success of creating partnerships.
“That’s [college access work] not in my job description and that is not how I am evaluated as a successful employee”.

School counselor interviews indicated:

- Partnering with community based organizations and postsecondary institutions is challenging**
 Although secondary school counselors noted that their departments were understaffed, they stated that it was sometimes challenging for them to incorporate community based organizations into their college planning work. They stated that it is sometimes more work to collaborate with external organizations and that it is difficult to know how to utilize volunteers coming into their school, including undergraduate students from local colleges, because the school day calendar is inflexible and has little room for meetings during the day.
- Identified need for additional opportunities for students to gain access to higher education institutions during high school**
 Interviewees expressed that they wished their students had more opportunities to visit

colleges. They felt that this would be beneficial for students to learn more about post secondary opportunities as well as increase motivation to do well in high school. The challenges identified around this idea include financial constraints and difficulty getting permission to take students out of school during the day. Additionally, the school counselors discussed that they would like to see their students be able to take more classes at the college level while in high school. They felt this would be beneficial from both an academic standpoint but also a financial one as credits are often less expensive when offered through a high school.

“I would love to organize trips where students actually get to go and visit facilities and see what is out there. I think that is one thing student’s lack. I don’t think they realize what is out there... I think students get motivated by seeing it in action, they may have thought college wasn’t for them and they actually step on a college campus and see there are kids like me here. “

- **High school schedules, time constraints, and limited support from districts makes it difficult to create partnerships.**

The interviewees discussed the challenge of college access programming in high schools. They stated that they often do not have time to meet with students to talk about their future plans. They also discussed that when they do have time to meet with students they have time constraints because of the amount of students in their case load. Additionally, many counselors discussed ideas they would like to implement partnering with local colleges or volunteer organizations but expressed that they did not feel these initiatives would be well received or supported by their school districts. They also expressed that they don’t know who to contact at higher education institutions to begin the conversation about partnerships.

“We don’t at this time have a college visit program, when I have tried to ask in the past [to run trips to institutions] I have been told no, that is their parent’s responsibility to take them”.

desire to see academic profiles of successful students at the various Rhode Island higher ed. institutions.

“That Harvard application is different than the Brown application. Well I want PC, well what kind of kid does PC want, its different than the Salve kid, different than the Johnson & Wales kid, different than the URI kid although at URI the Engineering kid is going to look different than the English major. I think that it lends more authenticity when we are getting it right from [Admission Officers] instead of making assumptions.”

- **Lack of incentives and available time restrict participation in professional development activities**

Both interviewee groups discussed that there was limited incentives to participate in professional development opportunities about college access. Additionally, both groups expressed that due to overwhelming day-to-day duties, there is limited time to participate in professional development programs or professional associations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the interviews with Admission Officers and secondary school counselors around college access, partnerships, and professional development, the following recommendations are supported:

- 1) The RI Department of Education and RI school districts should look into incentives for school counselors to conduct professional development surrounding college access and higher education knowledge as well as encourage school districts to allow counselors the opportunity to attend events (including time out of the building, funding for travel and registration for conferences, workshops or campus visits).
- 2) Information needs to be provided to middle and secondary school counselors as well as community based organizations about what courses their students need to be taking to be admitted into all Rhode Island institutions, including specific majors within those institutions.
- 3) Early intervention programs need to be created and institutionalized to get students and their families beginning to think about college earlier and understand that the academic choices they make in middle school and early high school will affect their post secondary options.
- 4) More time needs to be set aside for college counseling. School counselors need to be meeting with students early and often during their high school careers to discuss college.
- 5) Increase forums, partnerships, and communication between colleges, schools, and community-based organizations that are working on college access and success.
- 6) Create ongoing dialogue between the Department of Education and Admission Officers to increase alignment between college admission standards and current high school curriculum expectations for students.
- 7) Dedicate professionals in high schools whose primary focus is working with students on college preparation and access.

THEME THREE

BUILDING THE PROFESSION FOR COLLEGE ACCESS EXCELLENCE

Higher education is rapidly changing with issues of rising tuition costs, changing standards, and confusion about complex college admissions and financial aid processes. Keeping up with the college access field, trends, and new information can be daunting to professionals, yet necessary for student success. Two themes emerged from the collective interviews of school and Admission Officers:

- **More information about academic expectations, information, and evaluation at both levels (high school and college)**

Both secondary school counselors and Admission Officers expressed a desire to learn more about academic expectations and evaluation measures. The Admission Officers discussed a need to better understand the curriculum options, rigor of courses, and how students were evaluated in order to receive their grades. The secondary school counselors expressed a desire for more information about the application review process as well as



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RESOURCES

PARTNERSHIPS FOR SUCCESS

www.ripartnerships.org

PFS is an initiative of Rhode Island Campus Compact and the Association of Independent Colleges & Universities of Rhode Island to leverage educational assets of institutions of higher education to enhance PK-16 school-based partnerships.

COLLEGE POSITIVE VOLUNTEER TOOLKIT

www.ricompass.org

A practical college access resource for professionals and college students who are working with K-12 youth.

WAY TO GO RI

www.waytgori.org

Rhode Island's source for college and career planning.

NACAC FCCT RESOURCE

www.nacacnet.org/research/PublicationsResources/Marketplace/student/Pages/GuidingEducation.aspx

NACAC's has combined the Guiding the Way to Higher Education: Step-by-Step to College Workshops for Students curricula with resources from the Families, Counselors and Communities Together (FCCT) manual to create the new Step by Step: College Awareness and Planning for Families, Counselors and Communities.

NEACAC

<http://neacac.org/>

The New England Association for College Admission Counseling is the number one resource in New England for college admissions professionals.

RIAAO

<http://riaao.com/>

The Rhode Island Association of Admission Officers (RIAAO), established in 1976, is a professional organization for college and university undergraduate admission, enrollment services, and records personnel who represent NEASC accredited institutions within the state.

RISCA

www.rischoolcounselor.org

RISCA is an organization that fosters professional development and networking with professional school counselors, graduate students and counselor educators that have the same passion for school counseling as you do.

COLLEGE BOARD

www.collegeboard.org

A non-profit committed to excellence and equity in education. Find office college planning and preparation tools to connect students to college success and opportunity.



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