

# How Higher Education Shapes The Workforce: A Study of Rhode Island College Graduates

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State prosperity depends heavily on attracting well-educated, skilled workers, who play a major role in sparking innovation, enhancing productivity, raising incomes, and driving economic growth. In recent years, Rhode Island has seen strong growth in jobs requiring a bachelor's degree, associate's degree, or other postsecondary credential, yet has struggled to keep up with the demand for educated workers.<sup>1</sup> Rhode Island also lags behind other states in New England when it comes to educational attainment. In the long run, a lack of skilled workers could undermine the willingness of desirable, high-value businesses to locate in the state.<sup>1</sup>

Our study explores the role of public institutions of higher education in addressing economic challenges by producing the workers who will drive the state's economy in the future. Rhode Island College (RIC) in particular plays a key role in preparing the state's labor force, because its student body is overwhelmingly made up of Rhode Islanders who tend to stay in the state after graduation.<sup>(a)</sup> This analysis offers, for the first time, an in-depth look at what happens to RIC students after graduation.

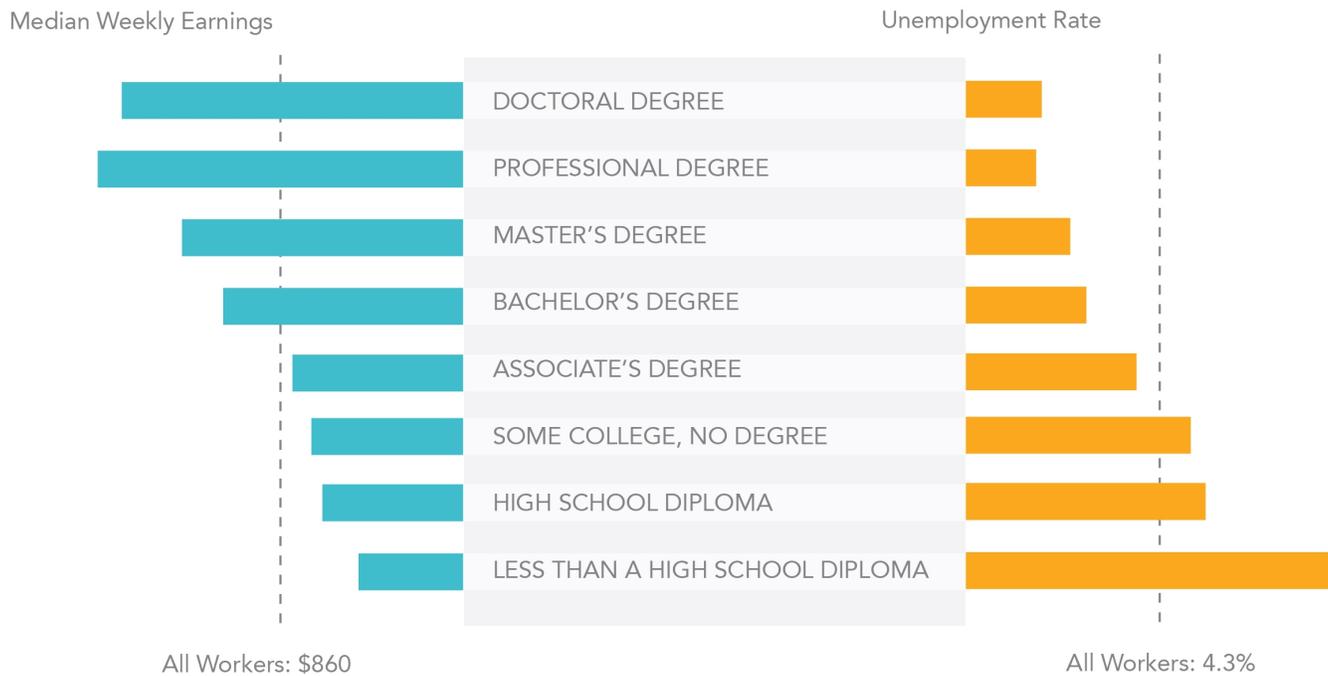
Our analysis is rooted in two related research questions: How can Rhode Island increase the educational attainment of its labor force? How can the state minimize "out-migration" by increasing opportunities for students to develop connections in Rhode Island? To address these questions, we use multiple data sources to explore what kinds of career and educational opportunities RIC students pursue after graduation and whether they continue to live in the state. This analysis can help us better understand and strengthen RIC's role in creating Rhode Island's future workforce.

*(a) In general, students at public colleges and universities are less likely than those at private institutions to move away after graduation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, degree production at public colleges has a larger effect on state-level employment and educational attainment statistics than does degree production at private colleges.<sup>3</sup>*

## HOW HIGHER EDUCATION SHAPES THE LABOR FORCE

Despite hand-wringing by commentators and the parents of recent graduates bemoaning the fact that commencement has come and gone without a remunerative job offer, research clearly shows that college graduates experience substantial economic benefits from attaining a degree.<sup>4,5</sup> More than a third of jobs require workers to have earned a bachelor's degree or higher, and the demand for postgraduate credentials continues to grow.<sup>6</sup> College graduates are more likely to be employed, hold more prestigious occupations, and earn considerably more at both the individual and family level, advantages that offset the large and growing cost of college attendance.<sup>5</sup>

Fig.1 The economic benefits of higher education



Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015.<sup>37</sup>

On a community level, research shows that higher average educational attainment raises wages for the labor market as a whole.<sup>7</sup> The general productivity and wage growth return to a state as a result of the public's investment in higher education is likely to be at least equal to the private return to the individual in the form of higher wages.<sup>8</sup> Because more educated workers earn more, they also pay more in taxes and are less likely to use government assistance programs.<sup>(b)</sup>

An educated workforce also attracts business and innovation. If the most desirable, high-value technical firms cannot find enough skilled workers in a state, they will neither establish nor maintain operations there.<sup>1</sup> In today's knowledge economy, business location decisions are increasingly driven by access to human capital,<sup>9</sup> while traditional concerns like tax rates and land availability become less salient.<sup>10</sup> Regions with greater than average educational attainment also have higher entrepreneurship rates and productivity levels, and entrepreneurs seeking to relocate tend to move to cities with more educated workforces.<sup>11</sup>

*(b) People with bachelor's degrees pay on average \$5,000 more a year in total taxes than do high school graduates, and are considerably less likely to draw on public assistance programs of any kind. Professional and doctoral degree holders pay more than \$20,000 a year in additional taxes when compared to high school graduates.<sup>4</sup>*

Unfortunately for states seeking to build skilled labor forces, highly educated workers tend to be more mobile and thus harder for states to hang onto.<sup>(c)</sup> Workers who have completed college show a greater willingness to move long distances in search of job opportunities in other labor markets,<sup>13</sup> and are more likely to end up residing outside of their birth states later in life.<sup>14</sup>

*(c) While a number of issues can influence a person's decision to move, opportunities for career*

## THE LANDSCAPE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN RHODE ISLAND

Rhode Island consistently falls behind other states in New England on key indicators of educational attainment. <sup>(d)</sup> Within the region, it has the lowest rate of adults with a high school diploma and the second-lowest rates of adults with a bachelor's degree and adults with a graduate or professional degree.<sup>1,15</sup> Between 2009 and 2014, the share of the population with only a bachelor's degree declined in Rhode Island while increasing in all other New England states.<sup>1</sup>

Rhode Island has a robust private higher education system for a state of its size. <sup>1</sup> However, it lags behind other states when it comes to public funding for higher education. In fiscal year 2013, Rhode Island ranked 46th in the nation in state financial support of higher education per \$1,000 of personal income.<sup>16</sup> Nationally, the funding situation has only weakened in the past decade. Across the country, state budget support for higher education dwindled substantially during the Great Recession and only began to recover within the last few years, though this recovery has not brought funding to anywhere near pre-recession levels.<sup>16,17</sup>

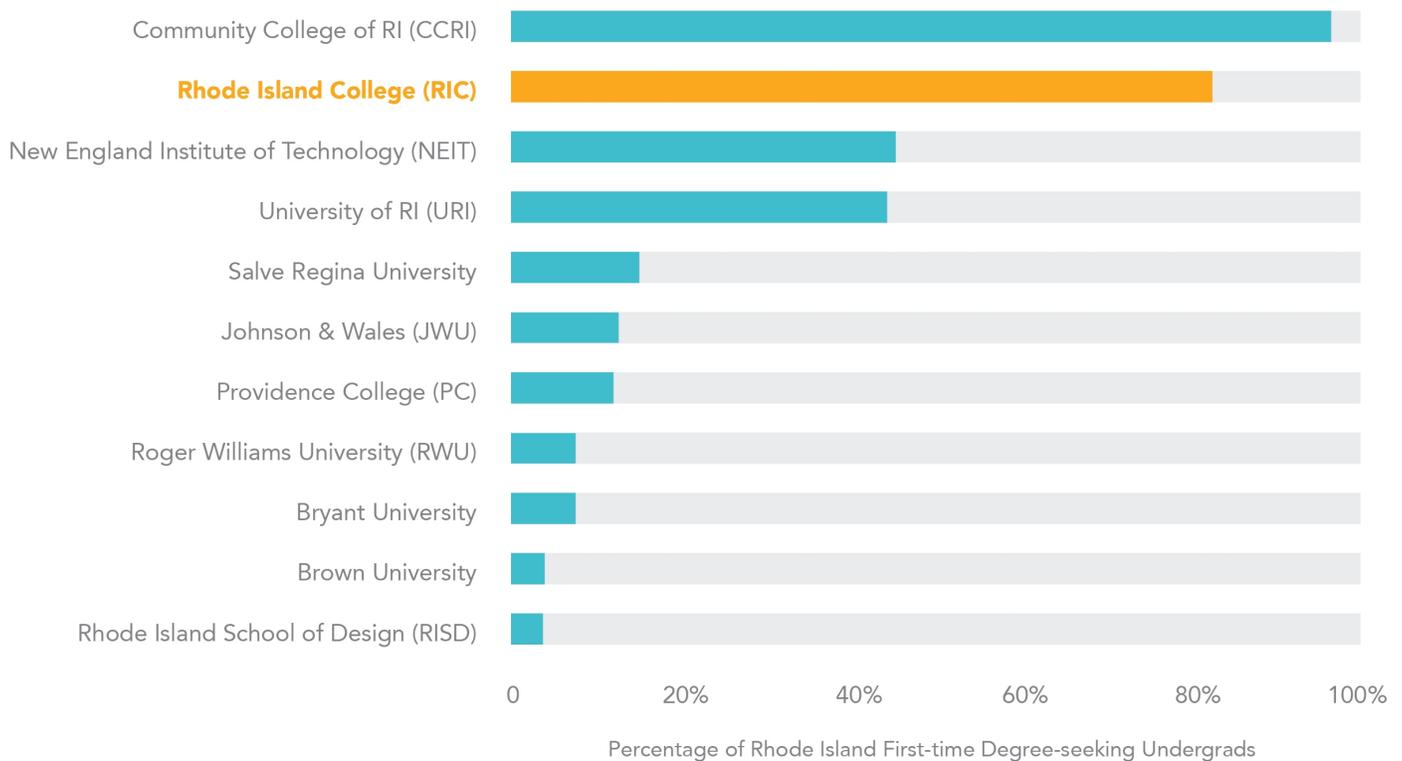
### RIC IS RHODE ISLAND'S COLLEGE

Because it educates a large number of Rhode Islanders, RIC plays a central role in enhancing the educational attainment of Rhode Island's workforce. It has the second-largest four-year college student population in the state, trailing only the University of Rhode Island. More than 85% of all RIC undergraduates are Rhode Island residents,<sup>18</sup> compared to 58% of URI students. At the state's private colleges and universities, even fewer students come from Rhode Island – as low as 4% at RISD and 5% at Brown.

| *(d) While a greater share of Rhode Island adults have a bachelor's or graduate degree than the national average, fewer have a high school diploma.<sup>15</sup>*

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Fig. 2 Share of undergraduate students from Rhode Island



*Data from individual colleges and the U.S. Department of Education.*<sup>38</sup>

Most recent college graduates remain in the state where they completed college.<sup>19</sup> They are more likely to stay if it is also the state where they grew up.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the undergraduates who are most likely to become part of Rhode Island’s future workforce are those who both grew up and attended college here.<sup>(e)</sup> However, more than half of all students attending college in Rhode Island (56%, the third-highest rate in the country) are originally from out of state, which potentially reduces the proportion who are likely to stay after graduation.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that colleges like RIC that educate a large share of home-state students may be particularly important to the future of Rhode Island’s workforce.

As a college whose student body is primarily composed of Rhode Islanders, RIC (along with CCRI) is an important source of future Rhode Island workers. More than two thirds of RIC students are still living in Rhode Island a year after graduation, and the majority either stay in the state for their entire careers or leave for a time and return. In contrast, research suggests that students at Rhode Island’s private colleges and universities – the vast majority of whom are from out of state – are more likely to leave the state after graduation.<sup>2</sup> If we want to attract businesses and families to Rhode Island, the nature of RIC’s student body suggests it has an important role to play in providing workers for businesses and affordable higher education for residents.

In addition, RIC is our state’s public comprehensive college. Comprehensive colleges offer a wide variety of bachelor’s and master’s degrees in both liberal arts and professional or vocational fields, and public comprehensive colleges enroll a disproportionate share of low-income and first-generation college students due to their greater affordability and accessibility. The ability to track, assess, and respond to issues related to degree completion and outcomes at comprehensive colleges is widely considered necessary for developing a complete picture of the economic outcomes of higher education, especially as they relate to local labor market needs. While comprehensive colleges are vital sites for research on postsecondary education, this type of analysis is not yet available for Rhode

## THE TRAJECTORIES OF RIC ALUMNI AFTER GRADUATION

Our analysis is based on an exploration of data on RIC graduates obtained from three sources:

- 1) Results from a 2014 survey of RIC students one year after their graduation, conducted by the RIC institutional research office.<sup>24</sup>
- 2) Data from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) on RIC alumni's pursuit of postgraduate education, focusing on the graduating classes of 2004-2005, 2009-2010, and 2014-2015 (pre-, mid-, and post-recession graduating classes).<sup>25</sup>
- 3) A custom-built original dataset of 628 RIC alumni who earned undergraduate degrees primarily between the 1980s and the early 2000s (as well as a few individuals from earlier cohorts) and who subsequently received alumni awards from the college. This dataset traces the career, educational, and leadership accomplishments of these exceptional alumni up to the present date.<sup>26</sup> While these individuals may not be representative of the entire RIC alumni population, their experiences can provide insight into the trajectory of successful graduates.

*(e) Studies show that it is difficult to entice students who go out of state for college to return to their home state after graduation.<sup>21</sup> It is also difficult to make out-of-state students more likely than they already are to stay.<sup>21</sup> For example, while robust merit aid programs can influence students' choice of college, they have little effect on retaining graduates as state residents after college completion.<sup>21</sup> This means that a state's best bet may be to encourage promising students to attend college in state.*

We used these three datasets to analyze the career, educational, and residential experiences of RIC alumni after graduation.

### **Do RIC graduates stay in Rhode Island?**

The 2014 survey of RIC graduates found that, one year after graduating, 70% of those who were employed worked in Rhode Island.<sup>(f)</sup> National studies show that, in the long run, about two thirds of individuals who complete their K-12 education in a particular state stay in that state after graduation.<sup>8</sup> Most RIC graduates attended high school in Rhode Island, then stayed in state for college at RIC, making them even more likely to remain in the state long term.<sup>20</sup>

Looking at longer-term trajectories in our alumni award dataset, 46% of RIC's outstanding alumni appear to have stayed in Rhode Island permanently after graduation, while 15% left the state for a time but returned. Just over a quarter of the alumni (28%) appear to have left the state permanently after graduating from RIC, and never held a job or obtained further education in Rhode Island.

The high rate of recent graduates living in state one year after graduation combined with our analysis of the longer-term trajectories of alumni in the award dataset suggests that RIC graduates who leave Rhode Island may not do so immediately, but rather at a later stage in their career as they pursue more advanced employment or educational opportunities. Some academic research on the trajectories of graduates from public versus private institutions suggests that RIC graduates are more likely to stay in Rhode Island for all or part of their careers than graduates from private colleges and universities, most of whom come from out of state and leave again after graduation.<sup>2</sup>

Multivariate analysis of our alumni award winner data shows that alumni who earned advanced degrees were less likely to stay in Rhode Island. While two thirds of alumni who never earned an advanced degree stayed in the state for their entire documented education and career, only a little more than a third of those with a graduate degree did so.

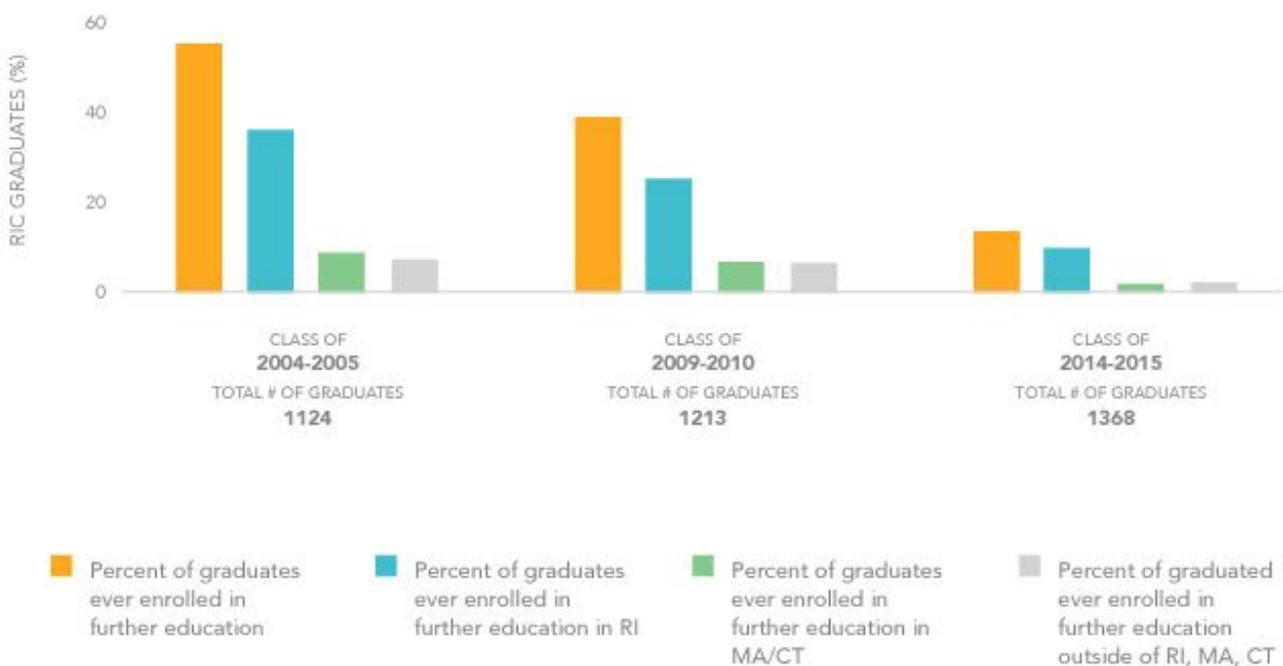
**Do RIC graduates pursue further education?**

As more workers complete bachelor’s degrees, distinguishing oneself by attaining graduate education has grown in importance. Nationally, about a third of college graduates enroll in an advanced degree program within four years of finishing their bachelor’s degree.<sup>27</sup> Rhode Island has a particularly high concentration of jobs requiring graduate degrees, with estimates suggesting that more than 11% of jobs in the state will require at least a master’s degree within the next few years.<sup>28</sup>

Data from the National Student Clearinghouse show that, within ten years of graduation, the majority of RIC alumni have enrolled in an additional degree program of some kind. The largest single destination for these students is graduate work at RIC, though a surprising number enroll in coursework at CCRI after completing their degree at RIC. RIC alumni who go on to earn graduate degrees do so in a large variety of fields, including social work, educational administration, performing arts, pharmacy, business administration, law, theology, public health, environmental science, nursing, and homeland security.

*(f) The 2014 survey and alumni award dataset do not tell us where people live, only where they work. So these figures may include individuals who work in state but live in neighboring Massachusetts or Connecticut, while excluding those who live in Rhode Island but work in Boston or elsewhere. In addition, work location information was unavailable for 12% of individuals in the alumni award dataset.*

Fig. 3 Graduates who ever enrolled in further education after RIC, 2015



In our dataset of alumni award winners, 59% of outstanding RIC alumni ultimately earned some kind of advanced degree, and 15% earned two or more advanced degrees. Among those for whom dates are available, it took an average of 7.1 years to earn their first advanced degree. A full quarter of alumni in the dataset who earned advanced degrees and for whom time to degree is available took nine or more years to complete their graduate degrees.

### ***Do RIC graduates enter careers that utilize their degrees?***

The variety of careers, employers, and volunteer positions RIC graduates obtain is far too lengthy and diverse to summarize here, but we can provide data on whether graduates enter careers that relate to what they studied at RIC.<sup>(g)</sup> The 2014 survey of recent RIC graduates found that, one year after graduation, 60% held paid positions related to their undergraduate majors (86% of the graduates were employed). This compares favorably to national data – in the immediate post-graduation period, only about 40% of employed college graduates work in positions closely related to their college majors.<sup>33</sup>

Looking at longer-term trajectories using our dataset of alumni award winners, 67% of outstanding alumni had jobs that we classified as closely related to their RIC degrees. Multivariate analysis shows that recent graduates (those who completed their degrees after 1990) are more likely to have jobs that are related to their RIC degrees. This aligns with existing studies showing that the likelihood that an individual's employment will be closely related to their undergraduate degree decreases over time, as workers change positions and take on new responsibilities that move them away from their original interests.<sup>34</sup> Careers evolve over time and it is important to prepare students to be lifelong learners who can adapt to changing career paths as they grow older.

Interestingly, multivariate analysis also reveals that alumni award winners who earned graduate degrees often (68%) did so in fields closely related to their undergraduate majors – for example, a political science student going to law school. Perhaps for this reason, alumni who went on to receive graduate degrees were more likely to have jobs or careers related to their RIC undergraduate degrees (75%) than those without graduate degrees (56%).

## **STRENGTHENING RHODE ISLAND'S WORKFORCE THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION**

Educated, skilled workers are the “core agents” of today's knowledge economy.<sup>35</sup> The rise of a globalized economy where financial and human capital are mobile, the loss of manufacturing jobs, and the growth of knowledge sector professions has intensified the need for states to attract and maintain this educated workforce.<sup>36</sup> Partnering with higher education to increase educational attainment among residents should therefore be an important part of any state's economic development strategy.

*(g) While college major remains influential in the hiring process, employers also report weighing evidence of leadership capacity, teamwork, written and oral communication skills, problem-solving skills, work ethic, and initiative.<sup>29</sup> Nearly a third of employers believe that broader skills are more important for recent college graduates than field-specific knowledge.<sup>30</sup> In comparing broad groups of majors, research shows that liberal arts majors are more likely to pursue graduate education<sup>31</sup> and earn higher salaries by their peak earning years than do those who major in vocational and professional fields, with the exception of engineering.<sup>32</sup>*

This report examines the public benefits associated with Rhode Island's investment in public higher education at RIC. The experiences of RIC alumni cut across professional fields and personal backgrounds and involve contributions to every sector of the Rhode Island economy. There is a robust, yet often undocumented, return on

public investment in higher education to be found by looking at these stories. The public's investment in RIC has yielded an educationally committed professional workforce that emerged in and remains in Rhode Island.

One of the best ways to improve the education level of the state's workforce is by supporting institutions like RIC that primarily educate state residents. Because academic research suggests that people who both grow up and attend college in Rhode Island are the most likely to remain after graduation, RIC, along with CCRI, has a high concentration of students who are likely to be part of the Rhode Island workforce in the future.

Investing in educating and creating jobs for RIC students may be more effective than trying to entice graduates from the state's private colleges and universities to stay put or encouraging Rhode Islanders who went to college elsewhere to return. Students who moved out of state for college have already demonstrated their willingness to be geographically mobile. If jobs are not available in Rhode Island, this population will likely remain elsewhere or go where the jobs are, but they can also serve as a cadre of economic ambassadors for Rhode Island.

There are a number of ways to increase support for RIC, CCRI, and other institutions whose student bodies are composed primarily of Rhode Island natives and likely members of the state's future workforce. Expanding the capacity of Rhode Island's public institutions to provide graduate educational opportunities would enable students seeking postgraduate education to obtain it at a reasonable cost in state, rather than going elsewhere to advance their education.

Rhode Island's range of higher education institutions offers the state the potential to benefit from the best of both worlds. We have a set of public institutions, particularly RIC, that educate students who stay in the state in great numbers after completing their degrees. We also have a collection of private institutions that attract out-of-state students and provide them the opportunity to experience, for at least four years, what Rhode Island has to offer. With more extensive graduate program availability, these students might choose to stay here longer.

In addition to expanding graduate programs, Rhode Island's level of public funding for higher education, which is among the lowest in the country, might also be reconsidered. It may also be worth examining how particular metrics for allocating funding – like time to graduation – can be adjusted to better fit the mission and student body of comprehensive colleges like RIC.<sup>(h)</sup>

*(h) Funding for higher education often uses metrics that emphasize the share of first-time, full-time freshmen who complete bachelor's degrees within four to six years, thus ignoring transfers and part-time students and penalizing the comprehensive colleges that serve the majority of these students. Metrics that focus on longer-term outcomes like graduate degree attainment and career productivity might provide a more complete picture of how well colleges are educating students and preparing them for careers.*

Finding creative ways to celebrate the achievements of the higher education community and successful alumni in Rhode Island could help promote the state as a center for high-quality education and cutting-edge research. A marketing partnership between academic institutions and economic development agencies could highlight higher education as a centerpiece of the state's economic appeal.

Such promotional efforts would show businesses that Rhode Island has a higher education infrastructure that is already producing the kind of graduates they need: workers who can think, write, communicate, and problem-solve in their industries. Attracting businesses would provide professional employment for the many Rhode Islanders educated by publicly funded colleges like RIC. Meanwhile, those Rhode Islanders who are products of the state's higher education system but who choose to leave can become spokespeople for the state that put them on the path toward a bright future.

[Read the full report here >>](#)

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## **ADDITIONAL INFO**

- [Type of Research](#)

## Core Insights

- Responds to questions of Policy Leaders with research projects that closely align with state priorities
  - Provides implications for challenging state issues
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## Endnotes

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24. Data from the 2014 survey of recent RIC graduates is not publically available and was provided directly to the authors by the RIC institutional research office.
25. A custom dataset on RIC alumni's pursuit of postgraduate education was obtained from the [National Student Clearinghouse](#) by RIC's Office of Institutional Research & Planning.
26. The brochures produced for each alumni award include basic information about the award winner's post-RIC educational attainment and employment at the time of the award. This information was supplemented with extensive

internet searches, drawing on LinkedIn profiles, personal websites, corporate websites, and other available sources to collect detailed information on award winners' educational attainment and career history. We have information on post-RIC educational attainment for 59% of our sample and assume the remainder did not earn graduate degrees. We were able to collect data on employment in sufficient detail to determine the relationship between undergraduate major and employment field for over 85% of our sample and were able to determine employment location for 96% of our sample.

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### Original Questions

How do students from Rhode Island College contribute to the state of economy after they graduate?