

PK-16 Partnerships & K-12 Service-Learning: Putting the Pieces Together for Student Success in Rhode Island

*An Interview with Dr. Brian McCadden,
Dean of Professional Studies, Providence College*

Q: What would it look like if PK-16 partnerships -- partnerships between K-12 schools and higher education institutions - reached their full potential in Rhode Island?

I would like to see Rhode Island take a collaborative, collegial approach to addressing real needs in places like Providence, Pawtucket, and Central Falls. What I see now are “pockets of success” around the state. Each of them is working in isolation from one another. Some last, some don’t.

In an ideal world, I think we need a statewide coordinated network. Let’s do a statewide needs analysis and ask the question: “what do Providence and other communities really need?” Let’s have the colleges and universities sit down together and figure out how we can meet these identified needs in ways that build on our individual institutional strengths. What resources can we each bring to the table?

We have started to have the conversation. Dan Egan, President of the Association of Independent Colleges & Universities of Rhode Island (AICU), has started convening teacher education folks from Rhode Island’s independent colleges and universities. These meetings have been helpful. However, being a small state is a blessing and a curse. While the smallness of the state makes it easier to work together, there is also some natural competitiveness with one another that can hinder collaboration.

The more I think about all of this, the more I believe we need to take a holistic, community-based approach. We need to build on the strengths of community life and ask the broader question moving forward: “What can we all do to strengthen communities – with schools being an integral part of the community?”

Q: What role does Providence College, and your work in particular, see for itself in advancing PK-16 partnerships in Rhode Island?

I am new to the Dean’s role at Providence College (PC). I just started in this position last July, so I am still assessing the situation, connecting with other departments, and networking internally. So far, I have been learning a lot about the work of our Feinstein Institute for Public Service and looking for new ways to work together to place more education students in service opportunities through the Institute. I am also learning a lot about the service and outreach efforts in our health policy/management and social work departments.

I want to explore what a collective, coordinated approach might be to developing and maintaining community partnerships that are meaningful and impactful for all involved. Should we define our work by geography – working within a one mile radius of the college, for example? Should we aim to make a big impact in a small area? Or should we spread out? These are the questions I am asking as I learn more about efforts across the PC community.

Within teacher education at PC, we are beginning a process of reviewing our program. We want to visit the question of what it means to send teacher education students out into schools as part of their teacher preparation curriculum.

For example, our education students need to learn about Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) requirements and regulations as part of their teacher preparation curriculum. So, instead of asking our secondary education students to simply study the new high school regulations, we partnered with North Providence High School to have our students assist their students on their

portfolios and senior projects. The result – a mutually beneficial partnership that helped our PC students learn first hand about the ins and outs of the new high school regulations and, at the same time, provided North Providence high school students with the individualized help they needed to be successful with their senior projects.

Q: Now, let's talk about PK-16 partnerships that specifically engage K-12 students in service-learning.

When I worked at Rhode Island College (RIC) several years ago, I worked with the Mount Pleasant Teacher Academy. We recruited high school students who wanted to become teachers and matched them with RIC students to work together. The college and high school students worked on special projects designed to introduce the high school students to the teaching profession. For example, they did joint research and classroom presentations on famous educators. I learned three things from that project: 1) the high school students really bonded and connected with RIC students; 2) the high school students realized they really were "college material"; and, 3) both the high school and college students were highly engaged and motivated.

The experience I had with the Teacher Academy really informs my support of service-learning as an effective approach to engaging students. There is great value and potential in having college students and high school students work as peers on real projects – doing "real work" together.

Q: What do you think are the major barriers and potential opportunities for K-12 service-learning in Rhode Island?

It is getting harder to do things like service-learning in the classroom with all of the accountability, testing and other measures in place. Creative projects are in jeopardy of being eliminated. And, I fear that with the new teacher evaluation systems in place there will be an even more narrowing of opportunity for this kind of learning and experience for K-12 students.

On the plus side, I do see an emerging area with great potential for service-learning in Rhode Island. Many high schools have already adopted senior projects or capstones as part of their graduation requirements for high school and many of the projects the students take on are already service-related. There is a great opening here to strengthen this connection between senior projects and service-learning.

Q: How do you think higher education, and especially teacher education, could help to expand the use of and quality of service-learning as a viable instructional strategy in K-12 classrooms in Rhode Island?

This conversation has already given me an idea for how higher education and K-12 could collaborate to support K-12 service-learning. What if we worked in partnership to put some professional development together for teachers and schools on service-learning and senior projects? We can do the same thing around the new Common Core Standards. There are places in the new Common Core where service-learning is a great fit. This would be a great PK-16 approach to supporting service-learning for K-12 students.

Dr. Brian McCadden is the Dean of the School of Professional Studies at Providence College. The School of Professional Studies encompasses education/teaching, social work, and health policy/management areas of study at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Dr. McCadden has a long history of working in teacher education and service-learning in Rhode Island and held positions at Rhode Island College and Salve Regina University prior to joining the faculty at Providence College.