GLOBALIZING TEACHER EDUCATION: URI is building partnerships across the world
Q&A WITH THE DEAN

1. Why did you accept the position of Interim Dean?

After completing my master’s program, I had two incredible mentors at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where I completed my master’s degree. Just before graduation, one of these mentors asked me to step into his role as the director of the Outdoor Education Program while he was on a one-year appointment to a different position. Not only did I take on that leadership role, but I also shared an office with my mentor and continued learning from him daily. In that role, I had the opportunity to develop new programs, offer professional development to our staff, and serve in a leadership capacity for the college. Although my career took me in many different directions after that year, I know it shaped me as a leader in higher education.

Looking ahead, what are your top priorities for the Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies?

As with most units across campuses, we will focus on developing priorities for the college that are aligned with the new URI strategic plan. I view this as an opportunity to re-imagine how we approach our work and the ways to nurture and develop partnerships, and offer the chance to develop a stronger culture. What is some of the best advice you ever received?

When I finished my master’s program, my thesis advisor gave me a card with the John A. Shedd quote, “A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.” At that time in my life the quote was a powerful reminder to trust my internal compass and explore big ideas. Today, a mantra I remind myself of often comes from Peloton: “Progress not perfection.” It’s a reminder to focus on what we can control to make progress with the understanding that there will always be more to do. I think that is an important message as we shape into the college we want to become.

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Caroline Roccii ’22

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20. Changing the World:

Stefanie Angus, Ph.D. ’23

COVER: GLOBALIZING TEACHER EDUCATION: URI is building partnerships with schools in West Africa, Europe, and the Caribbean, including the Democratic Republic, where global education and partnerships coordinator Colleen Ausmus photographed this mural.

In 2021–2022, I shared five goals for the academic year:

1. Improve college communication.

2. Diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (DEI).

3. School of Education accreditation.

4. Providence Campus as an innovation incubator.

5. Setting strategic priorities.

Due to the development of a new URI strategic plan, I tabulated the fifth goal so we can align to the new plan once we receive it. As for the other four, I believe we made great progress in each area.

Working with our marketing and communications team, we have developed a robust communication plan to roll out this year, with goals for timely information, transparency, and celebrating our community.

Faculty and staff across the college are engaged in several DEI efforts, many of which launched this past year and continue to grow.

Thanks to the work of the School of Education, all our initial and advanced licensure programs received full accreditation from the Association for Advancing Quality in Education and Preparation.

We made great strides with our Providence Campus in building and strengthening partnerships with the local community. There are big things on the horizon that I plan to share soon!

What do you see as the strengths of the Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies and how will you build on upon their successes?

We have wonderful people in the Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies, and I consider myself fortunate to work with our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends. When one of your strengths is your people, you are off to a great start! Based on our recent accreditation success, as well as our rising enrollment, it is clear our School of Education is doing excellent programmatic work. The School of Education is now looking to develop deeper partnerships with several school districts, specifically with more of our urban districts. In doing so, the School of Education will also be developing field experiences in new and exciting ways.

Our Providence Campus has great potential to evolve into an innovation incubator that conceives of higher education in more dynamic and nimble ways and brings in partners from across the state to learn state-of-the-art skills that URI is uniquely positioned to offer.

What are your plans to foster an atmosphere of diversity and inclusivity in the Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies?

I have several and will focus on three for now. First, my priority is for us to engage in authentic diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work. Too often, initiatives in these areas are performative and can be more harmful than helpful. To this end, the second plan is to conduct a review of all DEI initiatives currently operating in the college and work to bring the leaders of those programs together to look for overlap and areas where they can support each other. Finally, as we look to our hiring plan for the next few years, I want to learn about practices that lead to both recruiting and retaining more diverse faculty and staff.

Take us back in time and share an anecdote about a moment from your undergraduate or graduate school years that sparked your interest in higher education leadership.

I had two incredible mentors at the University of Minnesota Duluth, where I completed my master’s degree. Just before graduation, I was considering my next career move, one of these mentors asked me to step into his role as the director of the Outdoor Education Program while he was on a one-year appointment to a different position. Not only did I take on that leadership role, but I also shared an office with my mentor and continued learning from him daily. In that role, I had the opportunity to develop new programs, offer professional development to our staff, and serve in a leadership capacity for the college. Although my career took me in many different directions after that year, I know it shaped me as a leader in higher education.

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engage with people from many cultures and students will need "extensive knowledge of and technically interconnected world. Investigating in the global marketplace of the 21st century," the study’s authors wrote. “Few teachers today are well-prepared to educate students for this new global context.”

Sierra Leone, West Africa: International Science Collaboration

In spring 2022, URI built a partnership with Njala University’s School of Education in Sierra Leone. The West African university had struggled with recruiting, preparing, and supporting science teachers because it lacked experiential science education material and equipment. Njala’s science lab was destroyed during the country’s 1991–2002 Civil War, the environment never replaced.

URI’s GEMS-Net (Guiding Education in Math and Science Network), the School of Education, and Njala University’s science faculty decided to collaborate on an online international learning science education pilot project that would bring together fourth-grade classrooms in Rhode Island and Sierra Leone for an interactive science investigation about soil in the schoolyards.

Launched in the fall of 2022, this pilot program is supported by the Village Link, a U.S. 501(c)(3) nonprofit with operations in Sierra Leone across shared learning environments. Supporting Njala University in its efforts to recruit, prepare, and support science teachers in an experiential format.

The joint science investigation’s foundation originates from the fourth-grade Rhode Island science curriculum, from which students from both countries will explore and answer such questions as, “What can we learn about our schoolyard soil?” and “What is soil?” The students will examine soil from different parts of their schoolyards and look for similarities and differences, ultimately helping them identify the components that make up all soils.

A fun experiential way to learn about science, it will also serve as an in-service teacher capacity-building initiative. The pilot structure is designed to minor participants on both sides of the Atlantic at all levels: URI and Njala University science faculty will collaborate to build the science syllabi and work with in-service teachers.

Pre-service teaching students from both institutions will have the opportunity to observe lesson plans and support faculty.

Fourth-grade teachers from each school will deliver the science instruction to their classrooms and collaborate virtually. Fourth-grade students will classrooms and can present their findings virtually to their partner class.

Other project goals include:

• Developing cross-cultural awareness across shared learning environments.

Building on the initial research activities with this partnership, senior university officials met to work through a detailed plan to develop a teacher-student exchange program and conducted a formal site visit to TUB. The goals of this partnership are to support URI students international learning opportunities to:

• Live and experience life in another country.

• Compare an international education system to that of the United States.

• Develop cultural awareness and curiosity.

Domestic Republic: A Cross-Cultural Comparison and Contrast of Educational Challenges and Interventions

Dominican immigrants make up the second-largest Caribbean immigrant population in the United States, and Rhode Island has one of the largest Dominican populations per capita at just over 5 percent, which is why URI chose this region of the Caribbean to establish its first faculty-led program.

URI is partnering with Entrena, a Dominican Republic teacher in youth and community programs, to launch its first Winter J-Term faculty-led program for education students, scheduled to run in January 2023.

Entrena was founded in 1982 by John Siebel, a Peace Corps volunteer, with a mission to "generate positive, sustainable change in individuals, communities, organizations, and countries through learning, training, and empowerment experiences."

Entrena was selected as the college’s third-international partner because of the long-standing commitment to supporting vulnerable Dominican communities and populations through education and its experience working with U.S. higher education institutions to co-develop culturally immersive educational programs.

Tashal Brown, URI assistant professor of urban education and secondary social studies, will lead the program. She brings her experience as a former educator in New York City public schools and her commitment to advocating for girls of color and changing the social contexts that impact their lives to this program. Her collaborations with youths, educators, and community-based organizations demonstrate an unwavering commitment to equity and cultivating critical and transformative educational spaces—spaces designed for innovative teaching and chances for students to engage critically and creatively.

This exchange of ideas and experiences is essential to fostering equity-oriented educational spaces that support the holistic well-being of youths from diverse backgrounds,” Brown said.

This program will include:

• A look at female youth empowerment through education in the Dominican Republic and the U.S.

• Direct observation, participation, and interaction with educators and students, nonprofit and higher-education faculty and students.

• Engaging in a service-learning project with Dominican Republic partners.

• Classroom discussions, lectures, and readings.

Feinstein College students will learn about the educational and social sector systems, life, and culture of the Dominican Republic and develop a deeper understanding of what it is like to live in another society. More specifically, they will get up-close look into the challenges Dominican female youths face, observe interventions used to combat these challenges, and learn how they impact their education and futures. In addition, faculty and students will share their experiences, research, and knowledge of youth female empowerment in the U.S. and participate in cross-cultural conversation with various people and organizations from the Dominican Republic.

Together with Entrena, Brown will lead a group of URI students to the Dominican Republic in early 2023 to be immersed in Afro-Dominican culture and society, exploring how social challenges many female youths and stateless Haitian communities face, how it impacts education, health, and future, and the interventions in place to support these communities.

“Students in the United States—especially those in low-income and minority communities—leave high school without the knowledge and skills to engage in the world-effectively and not just survive," the Longview Foundation study’s authors wrote. Looking at Rhode Island’s demographics, many of its classrooms are multicultural with a large portion of students from lower-income families.

The Alan Shaw Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies supports these communities and is working to prepare Rhode Island students for a more international 21st century by globalizing its teacher education programs.
‘Moving Hurdles’ of Higher Ed
Collaboration Is Key for Associate Dean Vaccaro

In the February 2018 issue of Inside Higher Ed, Patricia Ann Mabrouk wrote that the “indispensable associate dean is often overlooked.”

Annemarie Vaccaro doesn’t see it that way. She believes that the position gives her “the power to empower.”

Vaccaro was named associate dean of URI’s Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies in January 2022, after serving as a professor and program director for URI’s College Student Personnel program. Inspired by a passion for socially just education, Vaccaro’s scholarship focuses on inclusion and critical perspectives to inform her work. She has published extensively about the experiences of diverse college students, faculty, and staff.

“Every single person has a talent. Good leaders can figure out how to cultivate those talents and remove the roadblocks so they can grow and thrive,” she said. “Collaboration, sharing experiences, and thinking holistically will help us meet our challenges.”

Vaccaro, who holds a Ph.D. in higher education administration from the University of Denver, has come “full circle” in assuming the role of associate dean, she said.

“College student personnel faculty are often tapped to be associate deans, provosts, and other senior administrators in college settings because we teach and learn how higher education systems work,” she said.

Typically, associate deans are responsible for overseeing and coordinating programs and activities that support student recruitment, education, and retention in the college. But Vaccaro wants to widen that scope to create opportunities for practitioners, policymakers, business leaders, and community agencies to develop partnerships that help students learn beyond the classroom.

“This is how we will be able to teach and learn in cutting-edge ways,” she said. Faculty can sometimes feel isolated, working independently, she said, which is why she is working to connect people who build partnerships that will translate across campus and disciplines.

“This kind of collaboration is good for all students and educators,” she said.

To foster creative thinking and collaboration, Vaccaro asks, “What are people doing that is so incredible that can be developed into a program or event or new curriculum? What are they doing and want to do more of, and how can we turn that into a tangible experience?”

Vaccaro hopes this kind of thinking will inspire faculty, staff, and students to do the things they were meant to do. She believes it is her job to encourage people to understand their passions and foster their talents.

“We have so many talented faculty, staff, and students in the college. When they feel supported and encouraged, there is no limit to what they can accomplish.”

Study: U.S. Grads Unprepared as Leaders
URI Professor, Research Partner Find Graduate Student Affairs Programs Lacking

Almost 60 percent of master’s-level student affairs programs do not require their students to take a leadership course, either because a course is not offered or the courses that are offered are part of a track or elective, the authors found.

The study was also designed as a thematic analysis to better understand what was being taught in these courses based on the course descriptions. Most of the leadership courses focus on practice, not the theoretical foundations of leadership.

“More so, it is rare, if ever, for these courses to prepare graduates to facilitate the leadership development of others,” said Kroll.

Kroll and Guvendiren agree there is significant work to do to prepare leadership scholars, in conjunction with traditional student affairs scholars and practitioners, to help create and teach leadership courses for budding student affairs educators.

If student affairs educators do not have the requisite leadership, knowledge, dispositions, and facilitation skills, then future leaders will be ill-prepared to navigate the challenges that await them, they concluded.

‘This is how we will be able to teach and learn in cutting-edge ways.’
—Annemarie Vaccaro

Annemarie Vaccaro

Students learn beyond the classroom. Practitioners, policy leaders, and community members can create opportunities for practitioners, policy leaders, and community members to learn about the experiences of diverse college students, faculty, and staff. Vaccaro believes that collaboration, sharing experiences, and thinking holistically will help educators meet their challenges.

Annemarie Vaccaro

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When Leadership Fails
Course Explores Spectrum from Ineffective to Toxic Bosses
BY JANE FUSCO

We’ve all experienced it. Horrible bosses who make our blood boil, management decisions that leave us shaking our heads, and the uncertainty of working in a toxic environment.

But what can be done about it? That was the theme of instructor Jonathan Hammonds’ Winter J-Term special topics course, Bad Leadership, in which students explored what constitutes bad leadership and developed techniques to avoid bad leadership practices and challenge the poor leadership of others.

Dissonance—when behaviors do not align with beliefs—is the default, said Kroll. Where there is dissonance there is bad leadership. “With dissonance, there is a disconnect between the values we espouse and the leadership we practice. Dissonance is essentially the inability to manage our emotions, attitudes, and behaviors due to a failure of connecting with ourselves,” he said.

The course uses leadership literature, personal experiences, and a virtual retreat to understand bad leadership, how it manifests in practice and how to shift leadership practices from dissonance and toxicity to resonance and healthy engagement.

As part of the course, students also record a 20-minute group podcast, sharing their experiences and reflections of bad leadership.

Jonathan Hammonds’ 22, a professional sailor and military veteran student, told the class of his experience in boot camp as an example of a poor leadership atmosphere, where being belittled and berated is the norm and fun in the moment may not be so much fun in the long run,” he said. “As an adult, I now understand how relationships can lead to productivity and that I need to be aware of the people around me.”

In their podcast—a mock radio broadcast—classmates Michelle Santos-Garcia and Andrew Kupke interviewed Fitzsenry and asked him pointed questions about self-improvement.

“We don’t always spot bad leadership for what it is and often enable it unknowingly. We then become bad followers,” he said. Fitzsenry said his first encounter with bad leadership as a young cook working for a person he describes as a “madman chef,” always yelling at the restaurant staff and drinking on the job. At the time, he said, it was fun to work that way.

“Experience has taught me that what is fun in the moment may not be so much fun in the long run,” he said. “As an adult, I now understand how relationships can lead to productivity and that I need to be aware of the people around me.”

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“We don’t always spot bad leadership for what it is and often enable it unknowingly. We then become bad followers.” —Aaron Fitzsenry ’25

I realized I wanted to become a better leader after I yelled at someone for smoking in the back of the building. He dropped his cigarette in a pail that had a pile of leaves in it, and it started a small fire. The look of panic on his face was unforgettable. I felt so bad. This isn’t who I wanted to be,” Fitzsenry said.

Santos-Garcia, a professional leadership studies major, worked as a customer service representative in a factory environment for a supervisor who had no managerial experience. “I think in the past I lacked courage to guide the leader. This may have led me to be an enabler in some ways. Now I know that there are different ways of being a bad leader,” she said.

She also stressed the importance of healing and recovery, much the same as an athlete does after an injury,” taking care of physical and mental health.

In their podcast, Fitzsenry, Kupke, and Santos-Garcia challenged their classmates to choose a leadership practice discussed in class and put it into practice.

Hammonds said the podcast helped him identify examples of bad leadership and related instances of posturing among professional soldiers who “presented themselves as more of an authority figure than they actually might be.” In identifying bad leadership, the students also studied why people are attracted to bad leaders.

People are attracted to bad leaders, Kroll said. “This is both individual reasons and group needs. “We often follow bad leaders because we want to keep our jobs to protect our way of life. It is often easier just to follow bad leaders because we know what we are getting. We don’t know what the next leader will bring, so we follow bad leaders because the unknown often provokes more fear than the known.”

At the group level, bad leaders often provide order and cohesion and let us know where we stand with one another. If the bad leader changes, group engagement may also change.

“We follow bad leaders because we have an affinity for this group’s identity and work—no matter how bad the individual leader is,” Kroll said.

In their podcast, Kupke signed off with, “Be well, lead well.”

A URI professor worked this past spring with an organization in Lebanon that will support women in rural areas of Lebanon, empowering them to make a difference in their communities.

The U.S. Department of State selected Rabia Hos for an English Language Specialist Program that focused on training teachers of English language learners and empowering women in rural communities in English language learning, in partnership with the Universally Specific Purposes of English and Knowledge (USPEAK) organization in Lebanon. Hos is an associate professor of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) and/or bilingual dual language immersion in URI’s School of Education. USPEAK promotes equal rights for all and supports women and youths in education, entrepreneurship, and livelihood skills, using the power of dialogue to prevent violent extremism and different forms of conflict.

Hos’ project ran virtually for three months, from March to May, and trained teachers in the Teaching Women Enhanced English program to become mentors in 32 regions of Lebanon. The training included workshops, teaching mixed ability classes, and verbal and nonverbal communications.

“This project let me work with an organization that supports disaffiliated and historically marginalized groups in other countries. It also helped to empower women to make a difference in their communities through access to quality education,” Hos said.

The English Language Specialist Program is the premier opportunity for leaders in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) to enact meaningful and sustainable changes in the way English is taught abroad. Through projects developed by U.S. embassies in more than 80 countries, English language specialists work directly with local teacher trainers, educational leaders, and ministry of education officials to exchange knowledge, build capacity, and establish partnerships benefitting participants, institutions, and communities in the United States and overseas. (“Professor) Hos is a leading scholar in the field of TESOL, and her commitment to language education as a pathway to equity and social justice serves as a driving force in her teaching and scholarship. As part of this opportunity, she has contributed to the empowerment of women in Lebanon,” said Danielle Dennis, interim dean of the Alan Swan Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies.

Since 1991, the English Language Specialist Program has had support in-country, virtual, and mixed projects in which hundreds of TESOL scholars and educators promote English language learning, enhance English teaching capacity, and foster mutual understanding between the U.S. and other countries through cultural exchange. During their projects, English language specialists may conduct intensive teacher training, advise ministries of education, participate in high-level educational consultations, and offer plenary presentations at regional, national, or international TESOL conferences. The projects selected represent the best of the U.S. TESOL community. In return, the program provides professional development opportunities to help participants experience different cultures and build skills that can greatly enhance their TESOL careers at home.

The English Language Specialist Program is administered by the Center for Inter-Cultural Education and Development at Georgetown University.

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Diversity and Inclusion in America’s Narrative

Grand Challenge Courses Examine Diverse Groups That Struggle for Equality

BY JANE FUSCO

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nthropologist Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” Thoughtful, committed students are the foundation of grand challenge courses at URI’s Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies. Inspiring them to focus on contemporary issues defining today’s world. At the forefront of these issues is social justice and a commitment to defy the social, cultural, and economic inequities imposed on individuals and groups of people.

The college offers two grand challenge courses that hold a mirror up to the status quo of equity and inclusion in society, urging students to analyze ideology as well as their own preconceptions and prejudices, to become advocates for equity.

A social justice advocate is one who visibly and clearly makes a difference to an oppressed and/or marginalized population, group, or individual. The School of Education’s EDC 103G grand challenge course, Education and Social Justice, focuses on race, cultural diversity, socioeconomic status, disabilities, and sexual orientation, prompting students to examine ideology as well as their own preconceptions and prejudices, to become advocates for equity.

As students scrutinize their unique identities relative to race, culture, socioeconomic status, family dynamics, ability, gender identity, and sexual preference—sharing, we learn that we are part of a collective struggle to, “move the conversation forward” on how we got to where we are. We take a look at and honor the movements that changed the way we think and continue to progress in terms of liberation. Examining the past also helps to illuminate who are the gatekeepers in a field that opens up for diversity student in health administration, who has experienced exclusion and bias, this course was personal.

As a Puerto Rican male, I have experienced many prejudices and assumptions working as an occupational therapy assistant. The field is 80 percent white and 90 percent women. Early in my career, I found myself eating alone and having limited interaction with my coworkers. I ended up feeling it was necessary to dissemble my stereotypes and prejudices, to better understand our role in helping solve the problem,” he said. The School of Professional Studies offers SPC 319G, Negotiating Difference: Diversity and Inclusion in America’s Narrative, a grand challenge course that examines contemporary and past differences of culture, race, gender, class, and identity of diverse groups in America that allows students to open up about themselves and their identities.

“Examining the past helps us to know how we got to where we are. We take a look at and honor the movements that changed the way we think and continue to progress in terms of liberation. Examining the past also helps to illuminate who are the gatekeepers in a field that opens up for diversity student in health administration, who has experienced exclusion and bias, this course was personal.”

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“These leaders want to mentor others who are like them. We need to include more diverse voices, break down what was familiar and comfortable, and challenge these practices that have been so exclusive,” said Kroll.

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“One important and critical examination of how our historical systems and structures, rooted in inequality, manifest into contemporary systems and structures embedded with inequality,” said Jonathan Kroll, instructor in the School of Professional Studies. Kroll explained how redlining—a discriminatory practice that denies loans, insurance, or services to certain areas of a community, based on the racial characteristics of the neighborhood—affects education for people of color who live in these areas and are denied resources for better educational opportunities. Even the scholastic aptitude tests (SATs) were originally written for a traditional white audience, not diverse populations, he said.

“From a leadership lens, many of our organizations are headed by white men of power and privilege. These leaders want to mentor others who are like them. We need to include more diverse voices, break down what was familiar and comfortable, and challenge these practices that have been so exclusive,” said Kroll.

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A s professionals, we have most likely been through training programs. Once completed, we put the binder or booklet on the shelf and resume business as usual. Did the training fail us? Or did we fail the training? Given the investment required to provide training, in terms of employee time away from the job, trainer fees, training materials, a venue or space for in-person offerings, and possibly refreshments, it is frustrating to employers that most participants will not automatically integrate what they learned into their workplace tasks. So, what can organizations do to maximize the impact of training? Let’s look at the Rhode Island Black Business Association (RIBBA) story, as an example.

RIBBA is a nonprofit group, “dedicated to advancing the business opportunities and viability of Black-owned and minority businesses in Rhode Island through access to vital resources, entrepreneur training, business advocacy, meaningful investor services, and workforce development,” according to its website, ri-bba.org. Through a statewide needs assessment, RIBBA determined there is a great need for leadership development programming to prepare high-performing Asian, Black, Hispanic or Latino, Indigenous, and multicultural professionals for senior leadership and executive roles while raising their visibility as a force within their organization and community. RIBBA partnered with URI’s Office of Strategic Initiatives (OSI), and six months later, the Emerging Leaders Development Program was born. The inaugural cohort participated from October 2021 through March 2022, with 25 participants graduating, receiving microcredentials, and 70 percent experiencing job growth.

“I feel the Emerging Leaders Development Program, especially, has really empowered me as a leader of color.” —Majorine Dellile

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“I feel the Emerging Leaders Development Program, especially, has really empowered me as a leader of color,” said Majorine Dellile, senior project and program manager at the R.I. Office of Health and Human Services. “I’m confident that the way that you walk in won’t be the way that you leave.”

Participant Farouk Ajakaye created a video with several participants sharing one word describing how they felt after completing the leadership program. (A word cloud generated from the words they used is included in the content.)

How did RIBBA and OSI achieve such high impact? By providing the right content to the right people with the right support. Sounds easy, right? Let’s unpack each element.

The Right Content
The most successful training is based on needs derived from data collection, which can include needs assessment surveys, focus groups, gap analyses, employee-engagement surveys, knowledge assessments, organizational effectiveness assessments, and environmental scans. RIBBA collected a mix of data to determine the need for leadership development training, including statewide surveys, interviews, leadership program assessments, and data on the state of diversity in business.

“Far too often, talented professionals of color have ceilings placed on their growth potential in corporate environments,” said Izzy Rodriguez, assistant director, digital marketing at Brown University and Emerging Leaders Development Program participant. “We are often told to ‘be patient’ or ‘wait your turn’ as we’re passed over for opportunities that we are more than qualified to flourish in. RIBBA and the Emerging Leaders Development Program aim to not only break through those ceilings; we aim to completely shatter them,” he added.

The next step was for RIBBA to engage an educational partner to develop and deliver the content. OSI was selected for that role.

OSI provides concierge-style services to its clients, matching content to organizational needs, selecting instructors with the expertise and demeanor to best engage participants, and providing continuous improvement through program evaluation. In addition, OSI was able to offer state-of-the-art training space at the Feinstein Providence Campus, which, when combined with expert instruction on leadership best practices, enhanced participants’ learning of that targeted content.

The Right People
Equally important to determining the right content is to target the right people. RIBBA recruited participants for the Emerging Leaders Development Program through an application and interview process, ensuring that participants were at the right stage in their leadership journey and motivated to take ownership of their development. As a result, participants demonstrated leadership in their learning process by participating in all aspects of the program, engaging fully in the in-person training sessions, embracing and implementing concepts learned, yearning for more information, and sharing their experiences.

Even if an organization does not have the capacity to recruit using an application and interview process, there are ways to ensure that program participants are set up for success in their learning process. Communication is key—before, during, and after the program. Before the program, a high-level overview of the content and the desired outcomes should be shared with constituents. During the program, supervisors should check in with their employees on their learning progress. And after the program, supervisors or other leaders should continue to support their employees with coaching as they implement what they have learned.

The Right Support
The Emerging Leaders Development Program participants come from a mix of professional backgrounds. Some are entrepreneurs, some work for nonprofits, others for private or public institutions. No matter their affiliation, all participants are supported during the program. The OSI instructors provide pre-work ahead of the academic sessions, engage them in multiple activities, offer small and large group discussions during the sessions, and provide additional resources for continuous learning outside the classroom. Participants also receive executive and career coaching to help them develop their “leadership brand,” are offered the support of advisors from their own organizations and RIBBA, and are invited to participate in networking opportunities. Some from the inaugural cohort even took advantage of volunteer or civic projects coordinated by RIBBA. These supports enabled participants to showcase and practice their strengths and newly acquired knowledge and skills and build relationships.

A second cohort of the OSI and RIBBA Emerging Leaders Development Program began in October 2022 and runs through April 2023. Evaluation data was reviewed and used to guide curriculum revisions and program structure, while application and interviews took place, and advisors and coaches were brought on board.

All of this ensures that OSI and RIBBA offer the right content to the right people with the right support.

By LORI HERZ

The first cohort of participants from the Emerging Leaders Development Program

Liza Ranglin, RIBBA founder and president, and Instructor Daimyene Layne give a thumbs-up after a presentation.

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Books Unite Us, Censorship Divides Us
Implications of Censorship Explored During Banned Books Week

BY JANE FUSCO

Books Unite Us, Censorship Divides Us is a list of the Top 10 Most Challenged Books to inform the public about censorship. The lists are based on information from media stories and voluntary challenge reports from communities across the United States. Banned Books Week is an annual event celebrating the freedom to read and spotlighting current and historical attempts to censor books in libraries and schools. Typically held during the last week of September, Banned Books Week highlights the value of free and open access to information. Bringing together the entire book community—librarians, booksellers, publishers, journalists, teachers, and readers of all types—in support of the freedom to seek and to express ideas, even those that are considered unorthodox or unpopular, Banned Books Week focuses on efforts across the country to remove or restrict access to books and draws national attention to the harms of censorship.

Keynote speaker Tiffany D. Jackson, author of 2021 banned book Monday’s Not Coming

Patricia Tull-Hawkridge, an open forum of teachers, school librarians, and information specialists included discussions on censorship and navigating the challenges of contested books and subject matter. "When our freedom of speech is gagged, our rights are being eviscerated," said Steven Pennell, coordinator of URI’s Arts and Culture Program and one of the event organizers. "As an educator and a performance artist, I believe that the idea of any important issue is remote unless we make an experiential connection," he said. "Censorship—having your voice and your needs dismissed—is very real and very dangerous. Exploring the reality through the words of a banned author, through the experience of classroom teachers, from the vantage point of drag performers and members of the LGBTQ+ community, and seeing the evidence in poster form is so much more impactful."

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A summer 2021 collaborative program that offered free food to the campus community became the inspiration for an independent study project for Aaron Fitzsenry ‘23. The weekly Free Farmers Market, originally organized by Amanda Misimier from URI’s Department of Nutrition and Food Sciences and sports nutrition specialist Kelli Kidd offered locally grown produce, cooking demonstrations, and useful tips and recipes students could make in their residence halls, such as an apple compote using a mug and microwave.

Fitzsenry used the event as the basis for his SPC 490 Independent Study project. The SPC 490 Independent Study course allows students to take on a project of their own design that can translate into a meaningful life experience or enhance their professional goals. Fitzsenry, a leadership studies major and professional chef in URI’s Dining Services and student in the professional leadership studies program, said, “Aaron undertook an ambitious, collaborative, independent study project that included many university stakeholders from diverse corners of the institution and crafted an experience that can and will undoubtedly serve as a model for other students. His recognition, the project has been celebrated at the highest level of food services professionals.”

with Kidd and Misimier to determine which items to offer each week and create cooking demonstrations to show participants new ways to prepare the produce. “I took a concept and turned it into an interactive teaching scenario,” he said. “Returning the literal fruits of URI’s labors to the campus community quickly became a reinforcing cycle of sustainability as its popularity grew each week.”

Fitzsenry used the experience to observe how teams and relationships are built across various disciplines on campus and to study the group dynamics of people working together and relating to each other to turn the event into his independent study project. With the help of Jonathan Kroll, SPC 490 instructor, Fitzsenry was able to refine his concept to offer maximum results. Kroll said the project prompted Fitzsenry to draw on his professional abilities as a chef and engage students on campus.

“We asked participants to make the dishes at home and come back to the market to let him know how they turned out,” Fitzsenry said, but Kroll’s guidance proved to be exactly what Fitzsenry needed to transform it into a focused study. “Aaron’s project was very practical, and his proposal was very strong. The independent study gave him the incentive to get the project off the ground,” Kroll said.

For their independent studies, Kroll’s students craft their own syllabus and study plan and keep a journal of notes, reflections, and meetings. Independent study projects provide students something different than traditional classroom instruction. “In leadership studies, our belief is that leadership is about doing good in our communities,” Kroll said. “Fitzsenry said he also learned that saying ‘yes’ to opportunities creates more opportunities.

“My goal was to observe how relationships are made, but the synergies from all of the people and groups involved opened up more doors for me,” Fitzsenry said. The project has made Fitzsenry something of a rock star on campus. He has been a guest speaker in a URI 101 class; has helped first-year students discover healthy food options; has created info-videos for Misimier’s Food Recovery course; and he has spoken to Jeff Johnson’s EDC 278 class on adapting work/life experiences to academic applications.

Fitzsenry has also created instruction videos of simple recipes that can be made in a residence hall or apartment using basic equipment. Videos can be found at: uri.edu/dining/scratchculinary

Fitzsenry hopes to continue the success of the Free Farmers Market and expand on his in-person cooking classes. Can a visit from celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay be far behind?

His cooking demos were fabulous. Using a one-burner stove and simple, healthy ingredients ... he transformed items from the market like apples and spinach or chard into delicious concoctions."

—Mary Parlage

He asked participants to make the dishes at home and come back to the market to let him know how they turned out. Turning the market into an independent study project was challenging at first,
Art is an essential means of exploring and communicating what it is to be human—to express creativity, to exercise the imagination, to discover, a tool for self-expression, and a vehicle of sharing one’s story.

But is that it? In fact, art is an integral part of education. It raises consciousness to social justice issues (poverty, homelessness, teaching the constructs of racism of specific groups of people and diseases), challenging and inspiring change. It is also a tool used in social work and psychiatric counseling, allowing clients to express conditions, feelings, and experiences that are too painful to verbalize. Art is an instrument that calls attention to environmental issues, sharing facts, and inspiring behavioral change.

Sadly, visual and performing arts are often an afterthought, the first subject cut as “nonessential” from the school curriculum or a program budget. They are rarely recognized as being an economic engine with the power to attract tourism, bringing people from other cities, states, and countries to visit, to stay in hotels and spend money on dining and sightseeing, or as a commodity in and of itself.

Over the last 25 years, URI’s Alan Shawn Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies Arts and Culture Program has been committed to raising issues through monthly exhibits and performances. The program has focused on such topics as domestic violence, racism, poverty and homelessness, the experiences of veterans and their family members, literacy, and incarceration. It has illuminated the history of the 1915 Armenian genocide, the Holocaust, and the LGBTQ+ community.

The program also has:
- Highlighted the need for training teachers in Africa.
- Explored such topics as cancer, genetic testing, gerontology and aging, anxiety, depression, and bullying.
- Examined the impact of climate change on the ocean, wildlife, food sources, and recreation.
- Explored the urban landscape and urban wildlife.

The Arts and Culture Program has celebrated aspects of women’s history, Black history, Indigenous heritage, and Hispanic, Italian, Irish, Portuguese, and Cape Verdean heritage through art, artifacts, music, dance, theater, and film. And it has featured professional and community-based artists from URI, the local area, and around the world.

During the 2022 season, the URI Arts and Culture Program celebrated:
- Women artists in our community.
- The accomplishments of art in the curriculum for K–12 artists.
- “The State of the Arts”—faculty, student, and alumni artists from the URI, Rhode Island College, and the Community College of Rhode Island.
- “The Synergy Project: Beneath the Surface II.”
- The impact of banned books and censorship.
- The need to find peace within our world.
- The plight of homeless veterans.
- The efforts of several organizations to create “little houses” out of used storage containers presented in visual and performing arts.
- What is art? Art is beautiful, moving, and educational.
Briana Scalisi earned Bachelor of Science degrees from URI in kinesiology and education.

Scalisi Named National ‘Major of the Year’ by SHAPE America

Briana Scalisi ‘22 has been chosen as a Major of the Year recipient by the Society of Health and Physical Education, known as SHAPE America. The award celebrates outstanding undergraduate students in the health, physical education, recreation, and dance professions. A double major in kinesiology and K–12 health and physical education at the University of Rhode Island, Scalisi was honored in April at the organization’s 136th National Convention & Expo in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Professor Furong Xu, coordinator of URI’s health and physical education program in URI’s School of Education, nominated Scalisi for the award. “Briana is one of our great students who is highly motivated and academically strong,” Xu said.

“Briana is of the Year” by SHAPE America is a great honor, and I am proud of the hard work and dedication I have put toward my health and physical education degree during my time at the University of Rhode Island,” Scalisi said.

R.I. Teacher-Leader Receives Educator of the Year Award

A Providence schoolteacher has been recognized for her work on the environment through her school’s partnership between URI’s School of Education, scientists, and engineers.

Stacy Gale, a fourth-grade teacher at the Paul Cuffee School in Providence, was named Educator of the Year by the Rhode Island Environmental Education Association (RIEEA) at its annual summit on April 30.

“Stacy’s dedication to environmental literacy shows in her science teaching and her leadership role within her own school and throughout the state,” said Kelly Shea, doctoral candidate and Guiding Education in Math and Science Network (GEMS-Net) specialist at URI, in her nomination letter.

“Stacy has committed many years as a teacher leader in the GEMS-Net program and is consistently engaged in research that moves environmental education forward,” Shea continued. Most recently, Gale and her fourth-grade team participated in research exploring virtual field experiences with the Roger Williams Park Zoo.

“Gale, who is a STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) specialist, has partnered with the GEMS-Net program since 2016. The Paul Cuffee School joined the program in 2015. As a teacher leader, Gale supports the program’s workshops and professional development in science education and collaborates with other teacher leaders from around the state to implement high-level strategies to prepare teachers to be STEM education leaders.

As partners, school districts receive ongoing professional development for all teachers, curricular recommendations that align with the Common Core State Standards and Next Generation Science Standards, and leadership development for teachers and principals.

When children learn to love their environment, appreciate the natural world, and solve challenging issues, the world will be a safer place.”

—Sara Sweetman
University of Rhode Island doctoral student Megan Jones, who uses the pronoun they and last year was awarded a prestigious Fulbright grant to work alongside faculty at the University of Helsinki and its AGORA for the Study of Social Justice and Equality in Education group, will be returning to Finland to continue their research. Jones has received a fellowship from the American-Scandinavian Foundation enabling them to complete their doctoral research on global approaches to queer and trans inclusion in teacher preparation programs.

Jones focuses on queer- and trans-inclusive practices within the broader context of the Finnish educational system, specifically, how teacher education addresses queer and trans topics and how these topics are addressed in educational research. Jones wanted to learn more about what one of the best education systems in the world is doing to push the boundaries of what is typically thought of as inclusion.

What Jones has found in the past year is a motivated group of educators—both educators in training and those now practicing—who have been through similar experiences growing up as the students they would be teaching. While not all who participated in Jones’ study were queer or trans, the education system and the faculty they encountered were.

“While my study was open to everyone, an overwhelming proportion of the educators who chose to participate were queer or trans themselves,” said Jones. “Growing up, they weren’t aware of any trans topics when surveyed, they face similar percentages of discrimination, mental health issues, and suicide ideation as their U.S. counterparts.

Ecooning this, Jones was recently in Norway presenting one small finding from their overall study at the Nordic Youth Research Symposium. In interviews Finnish pre-service teachers who were also queer or trans-identified, participants shared how their experiences as young people in the Finnish education system impacted their identity development in relation to gender and sexuality and how that has helped to solidify their intention to act as inclusive, out, representative teachers in the future. While there is a commitment among many educators—in Finland and elsewhere—to be more inclusive, there is still work to be done worldwide.

Jones, whose work has been well-received, has been invited to present at several conferences and events and collaborate on papers. The fellowship will enable them to finish their dissertation and continue some of the work they have been involved in that is both related to and in addition to their research—including providing training and lectures for the faculty in the Education Sciences Department at the University of Helsinki on queer and trans inclusion, working with faculty at local high schools to assist them in meeting curriculum requirements related to queer and trans topics, and assisting the International Red Cross to work with young Ukrainian refugees on their literacy skills.

They hope their additional time in Finland will enable them to continue collaboration with their Finnish counterparts and collect more longitudinal data. In addition, they have been able to extend their visiting researcher contract with the University of Helsinki and will be joining the department’s equity group and its subcommittee focused on providing professional development and training. They also hope to open the lines of communication between URI and some of the groups they have been working with in Finland—particularly to ensure that student voices are heard and amplified.

“Integrating myself into this community of scholars and starting to understand the culture and nuance of Nordic educational research has really been a highlight for me,” said Jones. “Being able to attend these conferences and share my work, spreading the URI name and sharing this message of queer and trans inclusion in a space where it has been assumed for a long time, but never directly addressed, has been exciting. Seeing the work resonate and hearing from fellow scholars that these are issues we need to talk about more has been extremely gratifying.”

The American-Scandinavian Foundation supports cultural and educational exchange between the Nordic region (Denmark, Greenland, Faroe Islands, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland) and the United States. Their fellowships are awarded in all fields, help further academic scholarship and scientific research, and encourage expression in music and the creative arts. URI students and recent graduates who are interested in applying should contact the URI Office of National Fellowships and Academic Opportunities for more information.

Fulbright Awardee Receives Fellowship To Continue LGBTQ+ Research in Finland

BY DAWN BERGANTINO

The University of Rhode Island and Providence College (PC) are teaming up to build a consortium among teacher education institutions and local K–12 community partners, to bring into focus global initiatives that guide teacher practices.

The project, Preparing Globally Competent Teachers—Rhode Island and Beyond, began in March and is funded by the Longview Foundation for International Teacher Education, with a grant award of $24,959. Rabia Hos, associate professor of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL), bilingual dual-language education at URI; Laura Hauerwas, professor of elementary special education at PC; and Nuria Alonso Garcia, professor of global studies at PC, are the leaders of the grant and the collaborative.

“We, as educators in teacher preparation at Providence College and the University of Rhode Island, intend to lead the conversation about globalizing education in Rhode Island and are committed to reframing global engagement through a local lens.”

—Rabia Hos, Laura Hauerwas, Alonso Garcia

Globally Competent Teachers

URI, PC Team Up in Project Funded by Longview Foundation

"We, as educators in teacher preparation at Providence College and the University of Rhode Island, intend to lead the conversation about globalizing education in Rhode Island and are committed to reframing global engagement through a local lens."

• To foster reciprocal school-community partnerships.
• To create a consortium among K–12 educators that connects disciplines and provides opportunities for mentoring and growth.
• An inaugural summit was held in July in a hybrid format for K–12 educators and community members, Hauerwas said.

“You work toward an education system that disrupts inequities and prepares students to be global citizens who take action for the common good in local and international communities,” Alonso Garcia said.

“They transform issues into questions of mindset and (teaching, starting) with intentional and sustained professional development for faculty, education leaders in our underserved communities, and Rhode Island Department of Education professionals."

The Longview Foundation seeks to build a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world by equipping youths with a global perspective and understanding of political, social, and environmental issues worldwide, by supporting teacher preparation, state initiatives and coalitions, and innovative programs focused on “internationalizing” in the United States. Founded by William L. Breese, the Longview Foundation has been helping young people in the United States learn about world regions and global issues since 1966.

Danielle Dennis, left, interim dean of URI’s Alan Shaw Faison College of Education and Professional Studies, and Yana Kim Tran, dean of Providence College’s School of Professional Studies, attend the July 20 consortium for teacher education institutions, held at the URI Auditorium at URI’s Finland Providence Campus.
Secret to Success
OSI’s programs are modeled to support expeditious completion at a guaranteed cost. CNE agreed to this by providing two other key supports for its nurses:
- Allowing its accepted nurses to attend two classes per semester for one day a week, regardless of their work schedule.
- Providing a sizeable percentage of the funding for the program costs.

In general, OSI noted that the average age of the nurses participating in the B.S. degree program was 37, with each having at least 10 or more years of experience. These nurses are some of the most valuable employees in health care with first-hand experience that can easily be connected to their new learning within a similar cohort group.

The cohort learning model brought employees from a large organization together to share in the learning of new knowledge and skills and created enduring internal connections for the nurses. A nurse working at Kent Hospital may not easily or regularly engage with a nurse working at Butler Hospital. However, learning together on their educational journey allowed them to connect with each other and exchange knowledge about their different areas of nursing.

This spontaneous aspect of the program was seen as a tremendous added value by their employer. By providing other supportive aspects—classes that met once a week on the same day and at the same times throughout the program, classes that met at a location with easy access, and utilizing employer financial support—OSI saw a 100 percent completion rate for every cohort.

South County Hospital was another partner that adopted this same model for 23 of its successful nurse graduates in their learning cohort. They utilized the same supportive structures from their employer of one-day classes and financial support for the costs. Even within a smaller hospital setting, connecting nurses who work in different departments and on different shifts is not an easy task. Nurses in the URI/South County Hospital cohort were able to learn together, fostering new relationships and assisting in the transfer of new knowledge and skills for their nursing practice. Not only were these professional nurses supported by their employers through the cost and time of earning at least 40 college credits, but the collaborative partnership between the University and these hospital systems provided the added benefit of URI’s positive economic and educational impact for our state.

Another important partnership is with URI’s College of Business. Its highly successful M.B.A. program has seen students from many industries earn their degrees. The College of Business has offered its M.B.A. program to the Pfizer pharmaceutical company since 2010, with 154 Pfizer employees graduating with M.B.A. degrees from URI, including 19 who graduated in May 2022. This last group of students comprised OSI’s 11th cohort of student.

Using the strength of partnerships, collaboration, and flexibility, OSI works with many entities to manage off-campus programs and provide an exclusive level of customer support for multiple cohorts of enrolled students.

The B.S. in nursing degree is one academic program that became a powerful professional success model, helping Rhode Island’s health industry meet both its internal requirements and those of the new federal mandate. There was a large return on investment for the nurses who could more easily afford to earn their B.S. degrees and who had an opportunity to develop new knowledge and skills for their nursing practice. Not only were these professional nurses supported by their employers through the cost and time of earning at least 40 college credits, but the collaborative partnership between the University and these hospital systems provided the added benefit of URI’s positive economic and educational impact for our state.

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Focus on Partnerships, Collaboration
URI Office of Strategic Initiatives Is Mission-Driven Success Story

BY CHRISTINE P. DOLAN

The Office of Strategic Initiatives (OSI), an entity within URI’s Alan Shaen Feinstein College of Education and Professional Studies, harnesses the power and success of educational partnerships that link education with training and career development to support Rhode Island’s workforce in the 21st century.

Working with adult learners, OSI considers all educational pathways for personal and professional growth and improvement, connecting with the university community and businesses across the state to advance professional development opportunities and support lifelong learning. OSI’s focus is on collaboration and offering and/or creating both credit and noncredit educational programs. Its experience with adult learners and university resources allows OSI to develop programming—including budgets, schedules, and locale—that meets business and industry needs.

A notable example of how OSI creates and fosters partnerships can be seen in its relationships with other colleges within the University. Achieving a Bachelor of Science in nursing for practicing nurses with an associate’s degree is both a sought-after nursing goal and an important professional milestone in the nursing profession.

Around 2013, the federal government implemented a new mandate for hospitals that required 80 percent of their working nurses to hold B.S. degrees in nursing. Partnering with the College of Nursing, OSI immediately acted to provide a two-year program for Rhode Island hospitals to consider this program for their nurses. In the fall of 2013, OSI committed to its first strategic partnership with Care New England (CNE) and launched its B.S. in nursing academic program for its nurses. Ten years later in spring 2022, we celebrated the graduation of a final cohort of nurses. In these 10 years, the triple partnership of CNE, College of Nursing, and OSI saw the successful completion of four cohorts of nurses. In total, 65 CNE nurses completed their B.S. degrees, with an additional special cohort of 24 nurses completing their master’s degrees in nursing with an administration specialization.

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Another important partnership is with URI’s College of Business. Its highly successful M.B.A. program has seen students from many industries earn their degrees. The College of Business has offered its M.B.A. program to the Pfizer pharmaceutical company since 2010, with 154 Pfizer employees graduating with M.B.A. degrees from URI, including 19 who graduated in May 2022. This last group of students comprised OSI’s 11th cohort of students. A new cohort began in fall 2022. Working in partnership with the College of Business, OSI offered collaboration, flexibility, and concise services needed to support these working professionals. The College of Business is now also successfully delivering an important global educational partnership with its M.B.A. program with students from Szczeny Island University in Hungary. The triple partnership accepted its third cohort of students in fall 2022.

In spring 2022, OSI graduated its first cohort of 10 Hungarian students, eight of whom traveled to the United States to attend their URI graduation ceremony.

Additionally, the College of Business, in partnership with OSI, launched a Doctorate in Business Administration, a new specialty designed program for experienced working professionals, enrolling leaders from across the globe in all industries. This program began in fall 2020, and cohort three was well-completed in fall 2022.

In its partnership with URI’s College of Engineering, OSI is currently offering a master’s degree in engineering, in partnership with Raytheon Technologies. OSI is delivering this program to Raytheon’s employees, incorporating many of the same details that have worked so successfully with other academic programs and businesses.

Using the strength of partnerships, collaboration, and flexibility, OSI works with many entities to manage off-campus programs and provide an exclusive level of customer support for the multiple cohorts of enrolled students.

Whether or not an employer is subsidizing an employee’s enrollment costs, OSI programs are designed to incorporate three essential elements:
- The cohort learning model.
- An expeditious program timeframe to completion.
- A guaranteed cost price for the duration of the program.

These elements allow businesses and students to build upon their successful pathways to completion. This targeted approach results in the tremendous success of a 100 percent student retention rate. It also allows business and URI colleges to engage and collaborate in very creative ways.

OSI easily and quickly works with all URI colleges and statewide industries to meet the ever-changing challenges of our state’s economy, while addressing new federal and state mandates, pressing business needs, educational initiatives, and newly developed local and global partnerships to train and enhance the workforce in our state, the country, and around the globe.
‘A pool offers an environment where everyone can move freely and be more independent.’

—Emily Clapham

Since April, Clapham, associate professor of health and physical education, meets her students on Wednesday afternoons at the South County YMCA to conduct an adapted aquatics program for adults with disabilities. The URI students manage the program and lead the exercises. They receive fieldwork credit, which is required for completion of their coursework. The program—made possible by a $4,000 grant from the John E. Fogarty Foundation for Persons with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities—combines socialization and fitness. Most of the participants have mobility issues, some are in wheelchairs, but all take part and enjoy the therapeutic experience. Caregivers can also participate. ‘It is important that people with disabilities feel included. This gives them that opportunity with a class and a community,’ said Clapham.

Clapham, a leader in fitness transformation, designed the program because there wasn’t a place for adults with disabilities to exercise. ‘A pool offers an environment where everyone can move freely and be more independent,’ she said.

Additionally, the YMCA offered more pool availability and is a central location so people in the community could participate. Clapham has also worked extensively with children with disabilities, having developed surfing and ocean therapy programs as part of URI’s Xtreme Inclusion program. Some of the children who participated in her programs are now adults participating in the adapted aquatics program.

Clapham’s students are training to become health and physical education teachers. Along with her students, she has created elective courses in dance and weight training; yoga in elementary schools; adventure education in high schools; and jogging and walking clubs before and after school.

Student Roma Gaschler recalls how one participant always asked her a question that made her day. ‘Every Monday when I would walk in, John would always ask me, ‘Are you happy?’’ she said. ‘He was willing to explore different exercises and routines, which made me excited. He was willing to challenge himself, and I’ve never been so proud.’

Clapham wants to inspire her students to transform the physical education class experience. She hopes they will implement a version of the adapted aquatics program in the communities and schools where they will eventually work and teach.
Degree Started as Teen, To Be Finished as Grandmother

Life sent Julie Smith in directions that made completing the degree she started as an 18-year-old challenging. But today, nearly 35 years later, she is on track to graduate from URI in May 2023, thanks to persistence, dedication, and help from URI’s Professional Leadership Studies degree program.

BY JULIE SMITH ’23

A 52 years old, it’s time to finish what I started when I was 18 and get that college degree. I am grateful to be at URI, selecting classes, learning, and engaging with others. I am grateful for the support and encouragement from my family, friends, and mentors to guide me. Most importantly, I am grateful that I never gave up!

After all, like many older students, getting here hasn’t been easy. In fact, at some points in my life, a college degree seemed nearly impossible. I was an inquisitive child who loved school, and attending college certainly was the plan. But life happened and plans changed. I planned to graduate high school in 1988, but I was 16 and expecting a child. Teenage pregnancy has a way of changing your trajectory in life. After trying for a time to navigate being a student and a young mother, I withdrew from high school, broken-hearted.

I hope when I choose to stay home and raise my child, I decided that at 18, I would take my general equivalency exams and enroll in CCRI the following fall. Although I wasn’t in class as a traditional student, it was important to me to start college with my graduating class.

I took the exams and walked across that stage to accept my GED, eight months’ pregnant with my second son, as my 2-year-old son cheered me on from the audience. “That’s Mommy,” he said, as I accepted my diploma, feeling an overwhelming sense of pride and accomplishment for both of us. I wanted to continue my studies, so I took two classes at CCRI and a few more the next semester. Then life took over. Again. I was in a difficult marriage, raising children, and the stress of life was taking its toll. It became increasingly difficult to keep up with my coursework. I had to take a leave from college.

My life became all about keeping my family together. Although I loved being a mom, I had unfinished business. I longed to be in the classroom to continue my education. I needed to focus on my personal growth as a woman, learn about the world around me, and gain the necessary skills for a career. I enrolled in URI’s Bachelor of Inter-disciplinary Studies program, part time, when my youngest child turned 3. Finally, something that was for me. I dove into reading books by Maya Angelou, Elie Wiesel, and Professor Stephen Grubman-Black. I wrote feverishly about what I was reading, as I couldn’t get enough of the stories they told. It was at this time I found myself relating to the authors and their plights, and I was hooked once again. But, once again, I couldn’t stay.

Over the years, I would attend classes when I could, switching majors, and colleges, until the inevitable happened—I got divorced. I was now completely on my own, with three boys to care for, a mortgage, and bills to pay, so I needed to work full time. I’d take classes when possible, and when the pressure became too great, I would stop again. I was in a never-ending cycle of enrolling, attending, and pausing my degree while trying to navigate my life and career as a single parent. I didn’t have a clear path ahead. Until now.

Today, my boys are adults, and I’m remarried to a wonderful man. I am still employed at the same company 22 years later. But it wasn’t enough. I needed to finish what I began so long ago.

In the fall of 2021, I applied to URI’s Professional Leadership Studies degree program. I enjoy learning about the different leadership styles and practices, especially authentic leadership and mindfulness practices and how they manifest in us within the business setting. I totally get this! And although we’d like to avoid the topic, it is interesting exploring traits that constitute bad leadership, while dissecting the dynamics of how and why this happens and what we can do as leaders to avoid the pitfalls of bad leadership. This program has opened my eyes to my own leadership philosophies and competencies while allowing for my personal growth and career development. The small class sizes give us ample time to have thoughtful and insightful conversations with one another, and, because we are mostly adult learners, we bring a wealth of experience into the classroom.

But as my younger years have proven, going back to college as an adult learner is not an easy feat when you have a full-time career, family obligations, and a busy lifestyle.

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Many of my weekends are spent reading, reflecting, and writing or working with other students. There are some days I have to decline invitations and pass on opportunities so I can complete my class projects. But this will only be temporary.

This year, I took the extra step and applied to be a peer mentor for 2022. I was accepted, along with two fellow students. During the application process, I was asked, “Why do you want to be a peer mentor?” My answer: “Although these are exciting times and we look forward to jumping right in, returning to college as an adult learner while juggling a career and family life can be quite intimidating. Navigating through the path of our college career, selecting a degree, meeting with advisors, understanding course requirements, and time management can be daunting. Knowing there is someone, a fellow student to help along the way, one who understands the journey, is invaluable. Just knowing there will be someone to greet you for Orientation may be the extra nudge to get you there. I often found myself trying to go it alone and ultimately withdrew, needlessly. It’s important to feel supported, and I’d like to be that someone for another student.”

During my independent study class, my advisor Jeff Johnson asked, “Why is it every time I see you here, you have a great big smile on your face?” I replied, “Jeff, I am just so happy to be here and grateful to have this opportunity to finish my degree.”

Every time I say those words, my eyes well up because, finally, after all this time, I can actually see my graduation coming to fruition with each class I take and every assignment I turn in. In May 2023, I plan to proudly walk across that stage to get my long-awaited diploma, with my husband, children, and grandchildren in attendance.

I hope my grandchildren will say, “That’s my Nana.”

And yes, I will be smiling!
Changing the World
Ph.D. Student Sees Power, Resilience in Girl Scouting

BY JANE FUSCO

Stefanie Argus, Ph.D. ’23, has been involved with the Girl Scouts of the USA since she was 5 years old and has continued her commitment to the organization for three decades, most recently being named chair of the Western Hemisphere Regional Committee, which manages governance and operations for 35 countries across North and South America and the Caribbean, serving nearly 2 million girls and young women.

Argus is also a graduate assistant in URI’s Women’s Center for the 2022–2023 school year and a doctoral student in URI’s education program, hoping to one day use her combined skills to teach at the college level and empower her students with the same confidence and innovation that Girl Scouting experiences gave to her.

“Girl Scouts and Girl Guiding are braided into my identity,” she said, having worked for the organization in various capacities from volunteer to local and national assignments up to the global level. “The leadership skills I learned are relevant and helped build resilience.”

In 2016, Argus was hired for a staff position with the Girl Scouts and relocated from Nevada to Rhode Island, which, she said, immediately “felt like home.” Since she had planned on pursuing her Ph.D. once she settled in, URI became her first and only choice.

Argus has worked in nonformal educational settings for more than 10 years and holds a bachelor’s degree in education and psychology from Mount Holyoke College, a master’s degree in adventure education from Prescott College, and is certified as a pre-K–2 educator and TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) instructor.

In her newest role as chair of the Western Hemisphere Regional Committee, Argus will be part of an 18-member board for the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, responsible for overseeing the programs in 152 countries, serving a total of 10 million girls and young women worldwide.

On the national level with Girl Scouts of USA, Argus has supported strategic planning, fund development and coaching, developing new programs for young girls, and creating domestic and international travel opportunities for older girls.

“I’m really honored to serve the movement in this capacity,” she said. “I am especially anxious to support additional countries to become full members. The region is specifically working with Nicaragua and St. Kitts and Nevis.”

Argus is no stranger to the value of such programs, having participated in Girl Scouts until she was 18, when she received the Girl Scout Gold Award, the highest honor a Girl Scout can receive, for the development of an after-school mentoring and activities program for students in grades four through six who wouldn’t typically have access to such opportunities.

And what about the famous Girl Scout cookies?

“Selling Girl Scout cookies is the first entrepreneurial opportunity for many Girl Scouts, who are at the helm of owning their own small businesses,” Argus said. The money from the cookie sales stays local and helps Girl Scouts participate in experiences including travel opportunities and Girl Scout camp.

Argus also proudly points out that three Girl Scout cookie flavors are rated among the U.S.’s favorite cookies: Thin Mints, Carmel Delights (aka Samoas), and Peanut Butter Patties (aka Tagalongs).

With all her studies and job responsibilities, Argus plans to keep “a very organized schedule.”

“It’s not just a commitment, it is a promise to be part of writing this next chapter for our international organization,” Argus said.

With this promise, Argus will focus her doctoral research on centering the narratives of women who are working toward antiracist activism in academic and professional work.

‘Girl Scouts and Girl Guiding are braided into my identity.’
—Stefanie Argus
Fishermen's Memorial, Camp Cronin
by Mike Bryce '94