

Report of the *University of Rhode Island Talent Development Program* External Review Team

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Executive Summary

The Division of Student Affairs at the University of Rhode Island engaged us as an External Review Team to undertake a review of the Talent Development (TD) program. This document serves as our report, to be considered alongside internal evidence including a Self-Study report, institutional data, and recommended financial audit. In sum, we found the TD program to have contributed substantially to providing access to URI for underrepresented minority and educationally disadvantaged students and to increasing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity of the undergraduate population. We also found the relatively low rate of persistence to graduation for TD program participants to be deeply troubling at a time when leaving college with educational debt and no degree is a significant burden. **We recommend, therefore, that the TD program mission pivot from one of creating access to one of promoting student persistence to success (defined as learning, persistence, and degree completion.)** It is completely in keeping with the land-grant mission of the university for the TD program to be a pipeline for access, but it must also be an agent for converting the promise of access into fulfillment of a college degree.

We found overall that **program mission, size, leadership, staffing, and resources are not aligned to achieve the goals of access and success.** A habit of operating as a “stand alone” program – from student recruiting through academic advising and support – may have made sense for the TD program in the past, but it no longer does. At a time when key elements of a student’s college life (e.g., academic advising, student records, course performance) can be integrated through digital mediation, and when there is abundant support on campus for the goals of increasing underrepresented students’ access and success, **the TD program must transform into an assessment-informed unit that leads campus partnerships on behalf of student learning, persistence, and degree completion.** To be sure, this transformation requires efforts on the part of the TD program leadership and staff, but also on the part of campus partners who, while they may support the goals of increased access and success, are not well prepared to facilitate success for students who are underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation, low income, recent immigrants, foster youth, or otherwise disadvantaged. Systemic racism, implicit bias, and unintended consequences of policy decisions must be addressed as the campus undergoes a transformation from an “us/them” or “their students/our students” culture to one that seamlessly supports TD program participants and other students who share similar backgrounds and experiences. **Responsibility for the success of TD program participants belongs to everyone on campus.**

Moving forward, there is a need for clarification of program goals, roles, and scope. It is not tenable to attempt to recruit, admit, advise, problem-solve, and run the summer program, among other TD program activities. Throughout this report we recommend ways to involve campus stakeholders in these activities and we recommend developing and formalizing priorities to guide decisions about who should take up which responsibilities. Generally, **we recommend focusing TD program staff on goals related to academic success and holistic problem solving.** The kinds of obstacles to persistence that some TD program participants face (e.g., poverty, family violence, homelessness) require coordinated, wrap-around support from campus partners. **Student success teams and an inter-unit, holistic co-curriculum of student support are two recommendations in support of campus and TD program transformation.**

There is also a need for examination of the summer program, which currently attempts to act as both college preparatory bridge and determination of contingent admissions. This dual purpose puts the program in a dilemma: To provide the most ambitious curriculum possible to prepare

students for success, or to provide courses in which students are most likely to meet the GPA required for admission? It is possible to provide both challenge and support, but the high stakes nature of summer course performance influences decisions about course offerings and advisement. **Clarifying the purpose, curriculum, and format of the summer bridge program, and considering its role in contingent admissions, should be a priority and should involve faculty, academic deans, and TD program staff.**

In the body of this report, we make recommendations for leadership, staffing, assessment, and resources that we believe will enable the necessary transformation and student success focus of the TD program. **We note the need for professional development within the TD program and elsewhere, a campus-wide culture of assessment, refinement of campus data infrastructure and accessibility, and alignment of resources with program mission.**

As we note in the opening section on context of the TD program, the need for URI to enact its land-grant mission of access for Rhode Islanders through continued inclusion of underrepresented, low-income, first-generation, and educationally disadvantaged students has never been more important. Nor has the personal risk of beginning college and leaving without a degree ever been higher. There is a clear case for the TD program to contribute to the public good and to the ethical treatment of individual students while meeting the moral imperative of educational equity in the 21st century. **Supporting Rhode Island high school graduates through their participation in the TD program at URI is a wise investment, with returns to individuals, the state, and nation.**

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I. Context of the Talent Development Program at the University of Rhode Island

The Talent Development (TD) program at the University of Rhode Island exists in the context of multiple tensions on campus, in the state of Rhode Island, and in the realm of public higher education today. “Tensions,” in our view, do not connote negative circumstances but represent opportunities to wrestle with critical issues at the core of the contemporary land-grant university mission: access for a state’s citizens to postsecondary education and fulfillment of the promise of access with the attainment of a college degree. Specifically, the United States and Rhode Island face the challenge of educating more low-income students in the context of decreased state support (by proportion) for public higher education¹. Rhode Island and other states are also attempting to maintain and increase access for underprepared students while decreasing the number who leave with educational debt and no degree. Universities must also attend to state and national success metrics while meeting local education and workforce needs. Among other programs nationally and in the state, URI’s TD program, which began as an access program, must evolve to address the ethical imperative of making good on the promise of college opportunity.

As a land-grant institution², URI has joined 500 other public universities in the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) in Project Degree Completion³. As such it has committed to contributing to “increasing the number of undergraduate baccalaureate degrees by 3.8 million between now and 2025” and “uphold[ing] the principles of student access, success and diversity in this pursuit”⁴. **These commitments are completely in keeping with URI’s land-grant mission, and the TD program is well positioned historically within the university to contribute substantially to accomplishing them.**

Since 1968, the TD program has acted as an agent of access for Rhode Island high school graduates historically marginalized on the basis of race (i.e., underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students) and/or educational disadvantage. In 1970, 16.4% of US citizens ages 25 to 29 held a bachelor’s degree, but White adults at (17.3 %) were much more likely than Black adults (10%) to do so⁵. By 2015 that gap had widened to 21.7 points (White 43%, Black 21.3%; with Hispanic at 16.4%, Asian/Pacific Islander at 62.8%, American Indian/Alaska Native at 15.3%, and Two or more races at 29.6%) even as the overall bachelor’s degree achievement rate rose to 35.6%⁶. Among Rhode Islanders 25 years and older in 2015, 31.9% held a bachelor’s degree or higher⁷. There were substantial differences by race and ethnicity: White (33.8%, Black 19.1%, Hispanic/Latino 13%, Asian 44.5%, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific

¹www.pellinstitute.org/publications/Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_United_States_16_Historical_Trend_Report.shtml

² URI is also a designated sea grant institution and identifies itself as a “designated urban grant institution” as well (though in 2017 the US Department of Education does not coordinate, fund, designate, nor list urban grant institutions). The historical mission of access to public postsecondary education derives from the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, so in this report we focus on land-grant identity. Should the urban grant designation be revived (and funded) by the US Department of Education, it would no doubt support the access goals of the TD program.

³ www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/project-degree-completion/project-degree-completion-in-depth

⁴ www.aplu.org/projects-and-initiatives/project-degree-completion/project-degree-completion-in-depth/commitment-statement/index.html

⁵ nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_104.20.asp; Note: only White and Black were included until 1980 when the more full list of racial/ethnic groups were included

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=CF

Islander 22.8%, and Two or More Races 26.8%)⁸. **Overcoming inequity in educational opportunity and attainment is a critical need for the state and the nation, and the TD program at URI has a role to play in doing so.**

By all accounts, since 1968 the TD program has contributed significantly to the growth in numbers of Black and Hispanic Rhode Islanders attending URI. For example, data in the Talent Development Program Self-Study document (November 28, 2016; hereafter “the Self-Study”) indicates that the 2006 entering cohort at URI was 13.4% underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities, about two-thirds of whom participated in the TD program (pp. 6, 8, 9). In recent years, however, that proportion has reversed. The Self-Study indicates that in Fall 2016, about 36% of entering students of color (n = 251) were TD program participants compared to 64% of students of color (n = 440) who were not (pp. 8-9), a ratio that suggests that the role of the TD program in racially diversifying the university may be diminishing relative to the need for the program to promote success for those students who come to URI underprepared. Indeed, although there are thousands of Rhode Islanders – some quite prominent – who came to URI through the TD program and graduated, there are now more Rhode Islanders who began the TD program at URI and left without a degree than there are URI graduates who are TD program alums. The Self-Study (p. 4) indicates that the average 6-year graduation rate of the TD program cohorts that entered between fall 2006 and fall 2010 (the most recent five cohorts for whom 6-year graduation rate data are available) was 46.2% overall, 45.2% for students of color, indicating that students of color in the TD program perform at essentially the same level as their White peers, an equivalency that is not true for the entering cohort as a whole (pp. 5-7)⁹.

According to the three External Review Team members who themselves had been TD program participants, through at least the early 1990s, the cost of attending URI could be covered through the financial support provided to TD program participants. The financial risk, therefore, of beginning at the university and leaving without a degree was limited to the opportunity cost of being in school instead of the workforce. To be sure, there is some psychological cost to leaving college¹⁰, and future earnings for someone with some college but no degree are substantially less than those for a degree holder¹¹. But most students who began URI through the TD program before the early 1990s and left before finishing had not also incurred the level of financial liability of student debt that current students can amass. As the cost of attendance increased and financial support for TD program participants failed to fully cover expenses, however, the consequences of access-without-degree-attainment have risen to a level that members of the External Review Team consider ethically questionable: In 2016-2017, the full tuition grant of \$12,862, while generous, leaves over \$15,000 cost of attendance to be met through other means, including in most cases Pell grants and student (possibly also parent) loans, possibly up to the maximum allowable amount. To saddle a young adult who fails to complete a degree with one or more years of student loans and the more-limited employment prospects of a high school diploma holder is to fail to uphold the public trust of the Morrill Land-Grant Act. There is an additional aspect of the public trust incurred through state appropriations; for every Rhode Island student (a TD program participant or otherwise) who leaves URI without

⁸ Ibid. Note also that names and definitions of federal categories of race and ethnicity change over time, so exact historical comparisons are not possible. See Renn, K. A. (2009). Education policy, politics, and mixed heritage students in the United States. *Journal of Social Issues*, 65 (1), 165-183.

⁹ The timing of the recession – and when it had the greatest effect on low-income students in particular – must be considered in looking at any retention and graduation data for these years.

¹⁰ For example, see Maclean, J. C., & Hill, T. D. (2015). Leaving school in an economic downturn and self-esteem across early and middle adulthood. *Labour Economics*, 37, 1-12.

¹¹ trends.collegeboard.org/education-pays/figures-tables/lifetime-earnings-education-level

a degree, the return on investment of public funds in the university is unfulfilled. The same is true for the federal investment through Pell grants. **It is vital, therefore, that the TD program pivots to embrace fully a mission of ensuring success (defined here as learning, persistence, and degree completion) for all students for which it provides access.**

At present, the TD program staff cannot successfully meet all historic demands placed on them for recruiting and admissions while also providing adequate support in the same model that worked when the program had fewer than 100 students per entering cohort, with the same number of staff that they presently have. The program has grown six-fold (to about 300 entering students per cohort), requiring additional work across all staff functions, with no clear prioritization process. **TD program leadership will need to transform the model under which the staff works and present a plan for aligning program size, functions, and assessment with program resources. The university will need to evaluate its commitment to the TD program and allocate resources that align with expectations for program and student outcomes (number and diversity of students served, persistence/completion rates, etc.).**

Historically, TD operated as more of a “stand alone” program than one fully integrated into the structure and culture of URI. We found on our visit that there are fierce advocates for TD program participants in all corners of the staff, administration, and faculty. **There is no question that student participants in TD are valued by staff and faculty of all backgrounds, at all levels of the university.** The TD program itself also has allies, as well friendly critics and some skeptics. The “stand alone” nature of the program – which may once have been a necessary strategy – no longer serves the program or its students well. As one dean pointed out, “TD students are URI students. They’re not getting degrees from Talent Development. They’re getting them from URI.” The historical isolation of the TD program has become a liability to its ability to best serve students who enter the university through its summer program. There was broad recognition of the need for the institution as a whole to more fully integrate the TD program into its work. Yet we also recognize that good intentions and recognition of the need to be more fully integrated are not enough to overcome the systemic racism and economic disadvantage that student participants in the TD program face in their home communities and on campus. **Just as it will require changes in the TD program, ensuring a way forward that shifts the TD program to focus on student success in full collaboration with other units on campus will require frank conversations about the ability of all units to address racism and its effects on the educational success of students, as well as adequate professional development and accountability for faculty and staff involved in these efforts.**

In addition to our assessment that the TD program must change its focus and the university as a whole must take responsibility for success of student participants in the TD program, the External Review Team identified an **opportunity for URI to examine the pipeline of “TD-like” students from application through matriculation and completion (or leaving the institution without a degree).** On the 2016 Common Application, 1400 of the 4500 Rhode Island high school graduates who applied to URI indicated they were interested in being considered for the TD program; only 880 of those applications were forwarded to the TD program for review and 600 of those students were accepted for participation in the TD program. Some number of the original 1400 were admitted “regularly” to URI, and some of them were offered the DiMaio scholarship. Yet in spite of their admissibility based on high school GPA and SAT scores, their family and high school backgrounds may be the same as students who came in through the TD program. Surely there may be other groups of URI students who might benefit from a free summer bridge program, the kinds of financial assistance offered through participation in the TD program, and/or additional attention from advisors and others on

campus, but the DiMaio recipients – who indicated interest in the TD program and many of whom may be quite similar to TD program participants in ways that matter for student persistence and completion – represent an identifiable group of students whom the university has worked hard to recruit and in whom Undergraduate Admissions places confidence through regular admission. Providing adequate financial, personal, and academic support to these students seems like a reasonable way to ensure that URI converts the promise of access to the reality of a degree for them as well. In the sections below we include more specific recommendations for assessment and other steps to consider undertaking in relation to supporting these students.

II. Talent Development Program Mission

The current mission statement of the TD program, as articulated in the Self-Study, appears to be a combination of an overview of TD and its summer program. The “Mission, Vision, and Purpose” description is:

The Talent Development Program serves Rhode Island high school graduates who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Disadvantaged is broadly defined to include multicultural students, first generation college students, students from lower socioeconomic status, students who have aged out of Foster Care, and students with circumstances which may adversely affect successful matriculation to a collegiate environment. Students admitted as Talent Development Scholars have taken the required core academic high school courses/college preparatory units for HS graduation but whose overall academic profiles (e.g., GPA, test scores) make them ineligible for regular admission. In special circumstances, a limited number of Community College of Rhode Island students and GED recipients are also eligible for admission through Talent Development. (Self-Study, p. 3)

In its current form the TD program mission statement does not clearly convey the department’s alignment with the university’s land-grant mission and its critical role in fulfilling that mission¹². Indeed the current Mission, Vision, and Purpose statement provide no clear indication or organizing vision of the TD program roles of recruitment, admissions, financial support (through the TD tuition scholarship), summer bridge program, academic advising, and ongoing problem-solving *in support of student access and student success*.

We also noted that trying to identify the mission statement on the program website is difficult and creates an obstacle for external (e.g., high school or community college students, families, community members, school personnel) and internal (e.g., URI students, faculty, staff, leadership) constituents. At a time when the internet is routinely used for information seeking and confirmation, it is important to have a clear mission statement in an easy-to-find online location.

¹² We observed that the university’s mission does not articulate a priority for student success. Though commitment to being a “public, learner-centered research university” is clear, the stated purpose “to learn and lead together” fails to capture the goal of elevating the state, nation, and world through graduating students prepared to improve their own lives and those of others. One might consider student success – defined as completion – inherent in the current mission, but there may be additional ways to signal publicly the university’s commitment to student outcomes.

Recommendations for the TD program mission and mission statement:

- 2.1. Clearly define the TD program mission in a one-sentence statement. The staff should consider drafting a clear mission statement separate from the TD program description (“What We Do”) on the website.¹³
- 2.2 Focus the new TD program mission on student persistence and completion.
- 2.3 Work with campus leadership¹⁴ to agree on a TD program mission that resolves, rather than creates, competing priorities across the functional/activity areas of the program (e.g., recruiting, admissions, summer program, advising, and problem solving). When resources (time, funding, etc.) must be allocated to various functions, the mission should guide decisions about prioritization.
- 2.4. Relate the new TD program mission statement to a particular portion of the URI mission statement, “The University is committed to enriching the lives of its students through its land, sea, and urban grant traditions.”
- 2.5. Incorporate the URI core values of “Diversity, Fairness, and Respect” in the TD program mission statement, as these core values support the need to serve students from “disadvantaged backgrounds” as defined by the TD program.
- 2.6 Revise the TD program description (What We Do) to include how the program is appropriate in the context of Rhode Island’s land-grant and flagship public university.
- 2.7 In aligning with the URI mission statement, describe how TD programs and services offer “distinctive educational opportunities enriching the lives of [URI] students through [URI’s] land, sea, and urban grant traditions.” Questions to consider in aligning with URI mission:
 - How can the TD program guide students to the appropriate major and learning community that fits them?
 - How can the TD program collaborate with graduate and professional programs to provide pathways to post-baccalaureate education?
- 2.8 Clarify and formalize the role of the TD program in supporting students currently referred to as “adoptees.” The TD program has historically served, without recognition for its efforts, a host of students who are not TD program participants but who seek or are referred to program staff. The External Review Team does not have a recommendation specifically to include or exclude these students in/from program support, but we do recommend that a clear decision be made about how the TD program interacts with them and supports their success as URI students.
 - 2.8.a Collaborate with Office of Community, Equity, and Diversity; Gender and Sexuality Center; and the Multicultural Center to develop a referral and support system for “adoptees” to receive similar advising and problem solving support.

III. Recruitment and Admissions

The External Review Team identified competing priorities across actors and roles in recruiting and admitting students to URI through the TD program. In addition there are opportunities to reduce duplication in efforts by TD program staff and Undergraduate Admissions staff. It is important to note the historical role among TD staff of returning to schools and community

¹³ web.uri.edu/talentdevelopment/

¹⁴ At present, the TD program is located within the Division of Student Affairs. Other stakeholders in the TD program include campus leaders responsible for academic programs, student advising, and undergraduate completion.

partners, building relationships and trust, and serving as role models for prospective students. Our commentary and recommendations are in no way intended to diminish the value of this outreach, and we note that the area of recruitment in particular is a sensitive one in terms of understanding the nature of racism and discrimination against lower income Rhode Islanders. The historic *and contemporary* contribution of TD program staff in recruiting underrepresented and educationally disadvantaged students from Rhode Island secondary schools to apply to URI is not to be lightly dismissed.

Although it is impossible to know how many majority students from middle-class (or higher) backgrounds check the Common Application box to be considered for the TD program, nearly one-third (1400 or 4500) of the most recent cohort of Rhode Island high school graduates did so, and 880 (nearly 20% of the in-state total) applications were forwarded to the TD program for admissions decisions. In effect, the TD program staff act as admissions decision-makers for one-fifth of Rhode Island high school graduates who apply to URI. By extending invitations to the TD program, they are also in effect making 5-year, full tuition scholarship offers to those admitted, incorporating a *de facto* financial aid/scholarships component to their work. And given the somewhat complicated high school histories that, for example, youth in the foster care system may present, the admissions decisions are not simple matters of meeting GPA and SAT thresholds; applications come to the TD program staff precisely *because* they are not like “regular” admissions files, amplifying the demand on staff.

As the story was constructed for the External Review Team, the path from secondary school to URI through the TD program begins with TD program staff doing school and community outreach. We did not leave with a clear understanding of how much time TD program staff spend off campus recruiting, but point out that prime recruiting time for applications (September and October) coincides with the weeks most critical to a first-year student’s ultimate success in college¹⁵, a time when it may be unwise to limit the availability of TD program staff to meet with and advise new students.

Undergraduate Admissions staff also visit under-performing high schools to recruit students in general, and to let students know about the TD program option. Undergraduate Admissions also offers multicultural recruitment days and specialized open houses for different populations of students. The DRIVE student organization involves volunteer students to help recruit underrepresented students to URI, and there are likely other recruiting events throughout the year centrally, through academic colleges, and through community organizations, schools, and so forth. The size of Rhode Island, the history of the TD program in the state, positive attention in the *Providence Journal*¹⁶, partners in schools and community organizations, and a loyal local community of engaged URI alums who participated in the TD program (aka “TD Nation”) make it seem likely to the External Review Team that the opportunity to enter the university through the TD program is well known among potential students. Recent growth in the number of URI applicants indicating interest in being considered for the TD program (see Self-Study, pp. 3-4) is evidence of the success of recruiting across multiple formats.

There is no description of the TD program on the Common Application for URI, but there is an option to indicate that an applicant would like to be considered for it. The TD program is

¹⁵ See Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., & Whitt, E. J. (2011). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

¹⁶ www.providencejournal.com/sports/20160302/thursday-night-should-be-special--for-uri-seniors;
www.providencejournal.com/article/20151220/NEWS/151229929;
www.providencejournal.com/article/20130904/News/309049939

promoted on the Admissions website, and it is generally possible to get a sense of what the program is. Presumably some students will look online at the TD program description to see if they meet the guidelines, or to learn more about it (although it is not clear anywhere exactly what “disadvantaged” means or what GPA or SAT qualifies one for the TD program; we understand that the breaking point between “regular” and TD program-eligible is contextual year-to-year). When applications come in, an Undergraduate Admissions staff member acts to admit those students who qualify for “regular” admission (even though they checked the TD program interest box) and then verifies that remaining applicants meet appropriate university requirements¹⁷ to be reviewed by the TD program staff (including having at least 13 units of approved high school courses).

Beginning when the Undergraduate Admissions staff releases applications to them, TD program staff spend at least one morning a week making admissions decisions through a process they thoughtfully described as one of discernment in which they use experience and judgment to offer 600 (of the 880, last year) students the opportunity to participate in the TD program and, if successful in the summer program, to be fully admitted to URI with a five-year full tuition scholarship dependent on their continued good academic standing. The timing of this half-day-per-week admission work coincides with the first weeks of the second semester, a time when students who completed fall semester with a GPA below 2.0 may be in particular need of in-depth advising, as might students in the 2.0-3.0 range (sometimes called “the murky middle” because they are succeeding academically, so will not draw much attention from academic support units, but are not thriving and are only one poor grade away from falling out of good standing¹⁸). As with recruiting, the admissions decision activities take TD program staff away from advising, supporting, and problem solving with continuing students – perhaps the clearest example of competition between the priorities of the “access” and “success” missions. Considering that only about one-third of students whose applications the TD program staff read will ultimately matriculate to URI, the benefit that may be provided in getting to know students in the incoming class through the application reading and decision-making process is far outweighed by the cost in staff time.

Recommendations for TD program recruitment and admissions:

- 3.1 Recruiting and admissions process for TD program participants should be a shared responsibility of the TD program staff and Undergraduate Admissions.
 - 3.1.a Develop a coordinated, non-duplicative recruiting strategy for the TD program that involves Enrollment Services, TD program staff, other campus partners (e.g., colleges, academic programs), and/or upperclass students who are TD program participants.
 - 3.1.b. Designate an Undergraduate Admissions counselor specifically for recruiting students to the TD program. This counselor could be a joint report to the TD program and Undergraduate Admissions, or at a minimum meet regularly with TD program staff to maintain seamless communication between the units. Ideally, this counselor would be a URI graduate who participated in the TD program.
 - 3.1.c. Consider developing and training a cadre of URI alums who were TD program participants who can do community outreach and recruiting at their high schools, meet parents and families, interview students, and so forth.

¹⁷ Presumably Admissions declines students who do not meet the minimum requirements at all and does not forward these applications to the TD program staff, though we did not ascertain this process.

¹⁸ www.eab.com/technology/student-success-collaborative/members/infographics/murky-middle

- 3.1.d Undergraduate Admissions and the TD program staff should work jointly, and as efficaciously as possible, to make decisions about which applicants to invite to the TD program.
- 3.2 Conduct a thorough analysis of student success rates based on differences in incoming student high school backgrounds to ensure that the 13-course requirement for TD program participation (compared to 18 for “regular” admission) provides adequate preparation for success at URI. Examine not only the number of courses but also whether there are key courses that emerge as “must haves” among those students who persist and graduate; use these findings to inform admissions decisions and work with high schools to inform guidance counselors and encourage prospective TD program participants to enroll in these courses.
- 3.3 Undergraduate Admissions should assess its efforts to recruit underrepresented students to URI and consider what effect changes in recruiting for the TD program may have on other efforts.
- 3.4 Key leadership stakeholders should consider the *de facto* role of TD program staff in determining a substantial allocation of URI financial aid (students who are accepted to TD program and successfully complete the summer program, who also qualify for financial aid, receive the full tuition scholarship for five years, as long as they stay in good standing).
 - Does this process align with other scholarship programs on campus?
- 3.5 Assess the effect on the “DiMaio students” – those who are admitted through the regular process and therefore not accepted into the TD program – of not having access to TD program scholarship or resources as a result of being a “regular” admit.

IV. Academic Advising and Problem Solving

Historically, TD program staff have provided a range of advising and problem solving supports to students in the program. To be sure, the life circumstances of a number of TD program participants are more complicated than those of many of their more economically and educationally privileged classmates; students coming from the foster care system, for example, or the children of recent immigrants to the US, homeless students, or students with no safe place to live away from campus face a host of challenges to completing their education. The reasons that students did not have the high school GPA, SAT scores, or core high school units for admission through the “regular” admissions process do not disappear when they arrive in Kingston. We heard repeatedly from current students and URI alums that the advice, counsel, and connections of the TD program staff were critical to their persistence in college. So when the External Review Team considered the role of advising by TD program staff, we looked at what might be viewed as “traditional” academic advising as well as the kinds of personal support and problem solving that low-income and first-generation students often need, at URI and elsewhere¹⁹. And as in the case of recruiting and admissions work, there appear to be a set of

¹⁹ See: Engle, J., & Tinto, V. (2008). Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First-Generation Students. *Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education*. (Available at www.pellinstitute.org/publications-Moving_Beyond_Access_2008.shtml) See also: Mullen, A. L. (2010). *Degrees of inequality: Culture, class, and gender in American higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. See also: www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/12/the-added-pressure-faced-by-first-generation-students/384139/ See also: Martin, J. M. (2015). It just didn't work out: Examining nonreturning students' stories about their freshman experience. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, doi: 1521025115611670.

competing activities both within the advising role and across this role with other TD program staff roles.

We learned that students participating in the TD program are supposed to meet weekly with their assigned advisor on the TD program staff. Rough arithmetic quickly exposes the impossibility of this task: Assuming about 300 students in each entering cohort and based on recent persistence rates, there could be 300 first-years, 260 second years, 240 third years, and somewhere around 300 fourth and fifth years - over 1000 students. Even if only first-year students had weekly meetings, and the meetings all lasted the 15 minutes that one staff member told us was expected, there would be 75 hours of advising meetings weekly, or the equivalent of two full-time staff doing nothing but back-to-back advising meetings every week, all week. In the context of other TD program responsibilities this is not a realistic proposition. Nor is there any evidence that a one-size-fits-all, 15-minutes-per-week “advising” model is effective or appropriate for all students. Indeed, contemporary student success and advising models emphasize customized, proactive (formerly called “intrusive”) support that can be scaled to align resources with student needs²⁰.

The university’s recent adoption of the Starfish platform should provide a tool that can facilitate the TD program staff’s customized work with students *in addition to* their collaboration with other advising and support units on campus. Ongoing training and robust adoption of the tool – with opportunities to do regularly scheduled, real-time, face-to-face case management with UCAS and other advisors – will be essential to the successful transition to this tool and maximizing its potential to serve students participating in the TD program across their time and locations at URI.

The External Review Team heard from some students, community partners, and non-TD program staff that TD program staff sometimes communicate to students a message that the TD program is helping them in a fight to succeed, but that others in the university want to see them fail. We also observed that many faculty and staff outside the TD program do not know what kinds of obstacles program participants face; at more than one meeting a faculty or staff member in the group learned about, for example, students not having books for courses, choosing majors based on tuition costs, facing food insecurity, or sleeping in a campus lounge if they missed the last bus home to Providence on a winter night. An “us against them” mindset pervaded our conversations with TD program staff, and a clear “our students/their students” mindset pervades the campus. Allies and supporters do not always know how to address this culture, and TD program staff may in the past have had reasons to distrust others on campus; in our judgment, more trust from all is necessary to change the culture to focus on support for student success. Nowhere is this culture change more necessary than in the area of student advising and support for holistic success. We noted that recent hires of former TD program staff (usually also URI alums who participated in TD program as students) in UCAS and other professional positions on campus represent an opportunity to disrupt the us/them mindset, as these individuals are ideally situated to lead this change.

It is TD program participants themselves who suffer from the “us/them/ours/theirs” culture. They are already in a high-stakes academic situation, in which entering URI underprepared they must

²⁰ See: Museus, S. D., & Ravello, J. N. (2010). Characteristics of academic advising that contribute to racial and ethnic minority student success at predominantly White institutions. *NACADA journal*, 30(1), 47-58. See also: Swecker, H. K., Fifolt, M., & Searby, L. (2013). Academic advising and first-generation college students: A quantitative study on student retention. *NACADA Journal*, 33(1), 46-53. (Full text: www.nacadajournal.org/doi/abs/10.12930/NACADA-13-192)

stay in good academic standing to maintain their tuition scholarship. Some students perceive advising from TD program staff to take “easier” course loads as supportive, but others perceive this advising as limiting. Even when receiving different but equally sound advising (e.g., to take 15 credits to advance more quickly versus 12 credits to focus on GPA) from TD program staff and UCAS or major advisors, some students reported feeling torn between these professionals. The External Review Team understands that every student has unique needs and that there is seldom one “right answer” advisors may provide. It is therefore imperative that all advisors (TD program staff, Honors, UCAS, majors, pre-professional, etc.) communicate with one another effectively. Where there are legitimate differences in advising philosophies (e.g., the wisdom of 15 versus 12 credits in a given term, or timing of general education courses) it is the responsibility of advisors, not students, to sort through options *in the context of that student’s circumstances* and provide a unified message to the student. This process is the essence of proactive, customized advising.

Recommendations for academic advising and problem solving:

- 4.1 Convene stakeholders group (TD program director, Dean of UCAS, persons responsible for advising in the colleges and Honors program, student athlete support, any other advising units) to:
 - 4.1.a Undertake process mapping exercise²¹ to understand from TD program participant perspective how advising occurs from pre-admission through graduation; then
 - 4.1.b Determine who should be TD program participants’ primary academic advisor at what point in their URI career, what process will be used to communicate this plan to students, and how to make administrative process transitions (e.g., who approves course schedules) as necessary; and
 - 4.1.c Determine shared priorities and a process to resolve competing priorities that all advisors on campus will use in advising student participants in the TD program (e.g., importance of number of credits; likelihood that a course combination will result in academic progress; major exploration; timing of general education credits; response to urgent academic and non-academic situations such as failing an exam, losing housing, or financial emergencies).
- 4.2 Convene stakeholders group regularly to resolve differences/conflicts among advisors; educate stakeholders about the realities of many TD program participants’ lives at and outside URI; develop ongoing professional development for all advisors (i.e., cross-training in responding to academic and non-academic situations involving TD program participants); and formalize relationships among TD program staff, UCAS, and academic college advisors.
- 4.3 Evaluate usage of Starfish and any other student records systems to ensure that maximum communication occurs across advising units. Train all professionals about what is necessary and appropriate to enter in notes and work to develop trust across units so that the notes system can be as robust as possible while preserving student privacy. Periodically spot audit notes to ensure quality and consistency.

²¹ See: www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/09/27/redesigning-college-processes-student-mind-essay
 See also: www.eab.com/research-and-insights/community-college-executive-forum/resources/chutes-and-ladders-infographic

V. All-university Responsibility for Success of TD Program Participants

As noted in the previous sections, the External Review Team observed that there is substantial on-campus support for the student access and success goals of the TD program and, in particular, for students participating in the TD program. There are supporters and allies across campus, many of whom have worked with TD program staff and student participants for years. Yet, we also noted an us/them mindset that pervades all levels of campus. This paradox – abundant support within a partitioned system – does not serve TD program participants, URI, or Rhode Island well. **Developing a culture and reality of all-university responsibility for the success of TD program participants will be a key step in improving their persistence and graduation.** We are *not* suggesting a “take over” of the TD program by some other campus unit, its dissolution, or the devolution of all TD program functions to others. But the delineation of responsibilities, building trust across units, professional development in cross-cultural, unbiased, and anti-racist interactions, and clear communication with all campus constituents (students in and outside the TD program, faculty, staff, alums, etc.) about a new approach, a “URI Talent Development Program 2.0,” as it were, will be essential. Careful consideration of the organizational location of the TD program will also be important to ensuring that it has the support and campus integration necessary to help students succeed.

Nationally, good practices in student success are emerging that entail optimizing existing campus programs and services to improve outcomes for low-income, first-generation, underprepared, and underrepresented racial and ethnic minority students²². At URI, some conversations have occurred to begin shifting responsibility for the success of TD program participants to academic and non-academic units. For example, according to the website of the University College for Academic Success (UCAS), their goal is “to help [students] have the most successful undergraduate experience.” UCAS refers to itself as the “Academic Home” for undergraduate students. The university must leverage UCAS services to support TD program participants as they do non-TD program participants, which will require leadership and hard conversations among stakeholders that we recommended in previous section (see Recommendations 4.1 to 4.3). UCAS staff must provide proactive and personalized advising to support TD program participants and other students (e.g., recipients of the DiMaio scholarship and/or other low-income, first-generation students) who may present with more acute needs than students from more advantaged backgrounds. Having former TD program advisors and/or URI alums who were TD program participants as part of the advising corps at UCAS is an important development and is a practice to consider as a purposeful strategy going forward. Similarly, Honors advisors and college/major advisors should understand their work to include responsibility for TD program participant success.

Comments by faculty members and others (college leadership, other administrators) highlighted a need for the URI community as a whole, including course instructors, better to understand the history, mission, and goals of the TD program. The vast majority of those whom we met appeared supportive to the extent that they understood the purpose, but several times we heard comments that implied that some of them believe that students in the TD program do not belong at URI, that these students cannot succeed and should not have been admitted. A number of TD program participants with whom we talked had received this message – sometimes from instructors and peers, and often from the TD program staff repeating the refrain that TD program participants would have to prove they belong at URI because there are faculty and

²² See www.jngi.org/education-insights/seven-principles-of-good-practice-for-student-success-partnerships-2/ See also the APLU Project Degree Completion (footnote 3) and Complete College American (www.completecollege.org), in which URI participates.

others who believed that they do not. To whatever extent some faculty (and others on campus) really do believe TD program participants “do not belong” at URI, this perception should be confronted and corrected. We met several faculty and deans who are working to increase diversity in specific areas (e.g., STEM) and/or to improve undergraduate education – capitalizing on this work and amplifying it on campus has potential to reach faculty who may be resistant to other messengers.

Finally, as we have noted in earlier sections, some TD program participants face obstacles to persistence – or combinations of obstacles – that go beyond what many faculty and staff understand to be the case. Developing a wrap-around support system of well-informed “first responders” in academic advising, counseling, residence life, housing, dining services, student employment, tutoring, health services, financial aid, and other units is an important step. But it is also important to create a purposeful network of support that helps connect the dots to understand the full ecology of a student’s experience – a student may approach different resources for specific help without identifying the other resources that could be useful. TD program staff have performed this “triage” role for many program participants, acting as a referral source and clearinghouse to connect students to the multiple resources they may need on campus, often through specific trusted colleagues. The External Review Team acknowledges the importance of this role, but also observed that not all students felt comfortable approaching TD program staff and the staff is not large enough to perform this role for all TD program participants all of the time. A purposeful network, a team approach, would benefit students in the TD program and, through deepened professional resource networks on campus, other students on campus as well.

Recommendations for all-university responsibility for success of TD program participants:

- 5.1 Convene directors of resource offices on campus (counseling, multicultural student affairs, housing, financial aid, academic advising, Honors, etc.) to create a model for multi-modal student success teams focused on TD program participants. These teams should meet regularly to discuss specific students who have come to attention as well as potential “population level” concerns. Teams should include TD program leadership and/or staff. (See footnote 37 for a campus example.)
- 5.2. Develop specific goals, actions, and accountability measures for resource offices vis-à-vis supporting TD program participants. These goals, actions, and measures should be clearly communicated across resource offices so that they can develop mutually reinforcing, non-duplicative, and non-competing supports for students.
- 5.3 Conduct rigorous assessment of TD program participant usage of resources (how often, for what purpose, how accessed/referred, outcomes of usage) as a baseline, then set goals for improving annually. More than a simple count of how many TD program participants use resources, this kind of assessment can provide information on the depth and reach of the network of resource professionals, with the goal of increasing over time to demonstrate change in culture and more universal adoption of responsibility for success of TD program participants.
- 5.4 Undertake an educational campaign on campus to inform faculty, instructors (adjunct, fixed term, and graduate student), staff, and others about the newly defined mission, purpose, and goals of the TD program.
 - 5.4.a URI alums who participated in the TD program and now work on campus could be brought on board first, so that they can fully understand the new mission and approach. Some of them may be interested in promoting the newly articulated work of the TD program.

- 5.4.b Embed messages about the TD program mission within the student success priorities of the university, and include the TD program when describing student success efforts on campus.
- 5.4.c In orientation for new faculty, instructors, and staff, be clear that the land-grant mission of URI includes a commitment to increasing the number of low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented Rhode Islanders who attend and graduate from URI.
- 5.4.d In hiring new faculty, ascertain their level of commitment to the land-grant mission of student access and success in general and to underprepared, underrepresented, low-income, and first-generation students in particular.
- 5.4.e Require faculty and staff to undertake training in cultural sensitivity and reducing the effects of implicit bias in their work with students and colleagues. Be specific about the kinds of challenges faced by URI students: homelessness, poverty, undocumented status, previous incarcerations, relationship and family violence, inability to afford courses/majors/books, lack of access to healthcare, food insecurity, mental illness, and disabilities. And, remind them that once URI admits students it is *everyone's job* to help them succeed, regardless of these circumstances.
- 5.5 Senior leadership (e.g., Provost, Vice President of Student Affairs, Dean of UCAS, other academic deans as appropriate) should convene to determine the optimal organizational location of the TD program. Considerations should include integration with other campus programs and services for student success, partnerships on and off campus, and resource allocation.
- 5.6 TD program leadership and staff should conduct environmental scan to identify newly emerging needs of TD program participant, such as changes in federal financial aid policy, RI DCYF policies or resources for foster youth, enforcement of federal immigration policy, any changes in the GI Bill, or reductions in state support for public transportation that will affect prospective and current TD program participants. TD program staff should lead pro-active campus educational efforts about these new challenges and be involved as appropriate in activating campus-based resources.

VI. Leadership of the TD program

The Self-Study characterized the leadership of the TD program as, historically, a “charismatic leader model” (p. 10), which is acknowledged in the leadership and management literature to have limitations within organizations²³. Certainly there have been iconic leaders of the TD program, and we met a number of students and URI alums who named individual TD program leaders as “*the reason*” they attended URI and successfully completed (a number of current and former staff were also acknowledged repeatedly by name). The External Review Team applauds the commitment of these leaders and the current leadership to the historic mission of bringing more underrepresented, underprepared, and educationally disadvantaged students to the university. In an era of data utilization, predictive analytics, and professionalization of student success services in higher education, a charismatic leader model is no longer sufficient. What is necessary now is a new approach in which program leadership embraces, articulates,

²³ See Conger, J. A., & Kanungo, R. N. (1998). *Charismatic leadership in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. See also: Conger, J. A. (2011). Charismatic leadership. In Bryman, A., Collinson D., Grint, K., Jackson, B., and Uhl-Bien-M. (Eds.): *The SAGE handbook of leadership* (pp. 86-102). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

and enacts a clear 21st century vision and plan for fulfilling the promise of converting student access to persistence and graduation.

There are a number of common higher education leadership/management practices that do not appear to be currently in use in the TD program. As far as the External Review Team was made aware, there are at present no long range goals or strategic plan for the TD program. There is no plan for ongoing professional development for staff – to keep them up to date on necessary skills and knowledge in the increasingly specialized (and improved) area of college student success – though some TD program staff reported that the new Vice President of Student Affairs has begun to implement some professional development activities in daily work practice. There are no benchmarks for individual performance or for program performance, and assessment of “what works” for admitting and supporting students is lacking. Regular performance reviews – a common good practice in personnel leadership and development – are not conducted, we were told, because there is no merit pay available to reward those staff who perform at higher levels²⁴

There is an informal career trajectory from TD program staff to other positions on campus, and this pattern holds promise as a model for the TD program and other staff on campus to cross-train, develop knowledge and experience, and benefit URI and possibly other educational institutions in the state. Increasingly, higher education institutions are setting expectations for progression from, for example, student worker, to graduate student, to entry-level staff, mid-career manager, and senior leadership. The wisdom and experience of past staff can be leveraged in other ways than keeping them directly in a unit, and bringing in new personnel can revitalize a unit. Without question, there is value in the “I’ve been exactly where you are” perspective of former TD program participants as staff members, and we do not mean to diminish this value; indeed this value can be increased through good leadership that can adjust to contemporary challenges and set a vision for the future. It is possible to have both/and: experience and local wisdom *and* fresh or renewed perspectives. The leadership of the TD program sets the tone internally and externally. As role models for the rest of the staff, program leaders should institute an office culture of professionalism and continuous reflection and growth that will benefit younger staff.

Recommendations for leadership of the TD program:

- 6.1 Conduct a comprehensive strategic plan, facilitated by someone outside the unit (e.g., a consultant) so that all TD program staff and leadership are able to participate. The process should include members from the university at large, administration, students, faculty, alums, and community partners. This strategic planning activity is not meant to re-do the Self-Study and External Review, but to use the findings of those processes to map out three and five year goals for the TD program
 - 6.1.a Align strategic plan with the mission of the program and the university.
 - 6.1.b Align the strategic plan with other student success initiatives so as not to create additional/deeper conflicts across units.

²⁴ It was outside the scope of this review to ascertain personnel and salary policies within the university or Division of Student Affairs. We note, however, that whether or not it is true that merit pay increases are available, insistence on high performance by staff who work in the critical area of student success is not unreasonable to expect on behalf of TD program participants, the university, and the state. To be clear, we are not implying that TD program staff are performing poorly, but that regular performance reviews should be implemented to assess, motivate, and encourage ever-improving performance.

- 6.1.c Incorporate in the plan the use of nationally known good practices and innovations for student success (e.g., predictive analytics, proactive interventions, academic recovery) as well as plans for keeping up to date on these innovations.
- 6.1.d Incorporate assessment/measurement goals into the process and outcome of the strategic plan, to begin to create a culture of assessment and evidence that can serve as a model to other units on campus. Benchmarks should be set for every aspect of the TD program: student success, academic program support offerings, number of contacts or touch points with students, partnerships, advising, co-curricular activities, and so forth. (See also Section X: Assessment)
- 6.2 TD program leadership should assess needs for professional development of all TD program staff and work with staff to create professional development plans, timelines, and accountability measures for ongoing professional development. Consider use of common tools (e.g., 360, MBTI, or Strengths Finder) to determine individual and team attributes in (among others) communication, supervision, assessment, and evaluation.
- 6.3 TD program leadership must identify resource and other needs (e.g., data, institutional research, projections) and advocate effectively for them with appropriate university stakeholders, positioning the TD program in the context of student success efforts more broadly.
- 6.4 Develop a succession plan for TD program leadership, which could include cross-training, delegating, and building the pipeline of leadership to move up and perhaps out into larger campus or beyond

VII. Staffing and Staff Roles in the TD program

The breadth of programs, activities, services, and events offered by the TD program include recruiting, admission, summer program, advising, and support of other programs. It is clear that activities related to student retention and persistence to graduation must become the cornerstone of the TD program. TD program involvement in student recruitment and admission should focus on scholarship review and special events programming, not the recruitment of all underrepresented populations.

According to the Self-study, the TD program has grown from serving 42 students in its original cohort to around 300 (give or take about 15 or 20 per year since fall 2006) new TD program participants matriculating annually to URI (pp. 2 and 5). The report did not outline the history of the staff size and organization of the program, but a number of current staff and former students told the External Review Team that other than the four advisors funded through the RELAAY grant, the size of the permanent TD program staff has not grown with the size of the program. Two key staff members retired shortly before our visit, and we understand that the intention is to fill two positions, redrawn somewhat from the previous roles to also include necessary expertise in assessment.

Staffing best practices and meaningful caseload comparisons are complicated due to factors affecting program mission and advising delivery. Direct comparison of staff caseloads are muddled by mission overlap with other departments and departmental variances, among other factors. The National Association of Academic Advisors (NACADA) advisor load recommendations for similar institutions would range from 230 to 280 students if academic

advising were the single assignment of staff members²⁵. The breadth of the TD program mission and activities makes this type of student load unmanageable.

Recommendations for staffing and staff roles in the TD program:

- 7.1 Move primary responsibility for recruiting and admissions from the TD program staff to Undergraduate Admissions (see section III).
- 7.2 Benchmark student success programs at other institutions and use national standards and examples of good practice in student success support to determine goal for ratio of staff to students, then align desired program size (i.e., number of students) and staff size (number of staff). “Goal ratio” should account for opportunities to develop staff skills in new ways and to use technology and human capital, including new configurations of campus partners and allies (e.g., advisory groups, campus mentors for students, and so forth), and the timeline for aligning program and staff size must account for transition to new ways of supporting students, developing capacity of current staff, and so forth.
- 7.3 Develop written performance goals, objectives, and outcomes for each year’s performance cycle to be used to plan, review, and evaluation work and performance of personnel responsible for delivery of TD programs and services.
- 7.4 Results of individual personnel evaluations should be used to recognize personnel performance, address performance issues, implement individual and/or collective personnel development and training programs, and inform the assessment of TD programs and services.
- 7.5 Personnel should engage in continuing professional development activities to keep abreast of the research, theories, legislation, policies, and developments that affect TD programs and services. These programs can be readily available through low-cost online webinars, discussion groups, and media, in addition to long term approaches to professional development budget forecasting.

VIII. Summer Contingent Admission/Bridge Program

Summer bridge programs – whether directly related to contingent admission, offering developmental courses without college credit, or supplemental preparation – have become commonplace as postsecondary institutions attempt to broaden access while increasing student success²⁶. Although evidence of the efficacy of individual programs is mounting, there is no consensus among scholars, educators, or policy makers as to which kind of program is most effective in increasing outcomes for low-income, first-generation, underrepresented minority, and/or educationally disadvantaged high school graduates. Evidence suggests, however, that some combination of college-level coursework and orientation to the campus and navigating college life is more effective than coursework or “college knowledge” programs alone²⁷.

²⁵ www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Clearinghouse/View-Articles/Advisor-Load.aspx

²⁶ See college.usatoday.com/2015/04/24/bridge-programs-help-first-generation-students-adapt-to-college-life/

²⁷ See Kallison Jr, J. M., & Stader, D. L. (2012). Effectiveness of summer bridge programs in enhancing college readiness. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(5), 340-357. See also: Strayhorn, T. L. (2011). Bridging the pipeline: Increasing underrepresented students’ preparation for college through a summer bridge program. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 55(2), 142-159. See also: Barnett, E. A., Bork, R. H., Mayer, A. K., Pretlow, J., Wathington, H. D., & Weiss, M. J. (2012). Bridging the Gap: An Impact Study of Eight Developmental Summer Bridge Programs in Texas. *National Center for Postsecondary Research*.

Through the TD program, URI links admission to the university to completion of a six-week program of “academic preparation courses, transition workshops, and credit bearing courses...offered through a five day-per-week residential summer bridge/college preparation model” (Self-Study, p. 3). Starting the first year in college with 6 credits “in the bank” provides an additional benefit to TD program participants, as a running start and a cushion should something go wrong later. The TD program covers university charges and out-of-pocket costs (tuition, room, board, books) for the summer program, and participants carry the opportunity cost of not working for pay during those six weeks²⁸. We learned that a number of students return home for weekends (which is permitted) during this program, so some of them may be working or caring for family while also undertaking summer courses.

In terms of curriculum for the summer program, the External Review Team was told that math and writing, which at some point were required courses, are no longer required. Too many students were doing poorly in math and putting their GPA (and therefore admission to URI) at risk, and the writing skills of TD program participants were “on par with other entering students” (according to a college dean). Yet, with no clear guidelines (that we could ascertain) for which 13 core academic high school courses TD program applicants must take to be accepted into the program²⁹, quantitative literacy and college-ready writing – fundamental skills for college success in any major – must be assured for students who will continue into the first year curriculum at URI. This question has implications for reviewing applications for the TD program and for the summer program curriculum.

TD program summer participants are placed in a bind: They must achieve a 2.0 (good academic standing) in the summer to be admitted to URI and receive the tuition benefit of the TD program. This guideline is sensible, as it is also keyed to federal financial aid guidelines that will affect eligibility for Pell grants and student loans, and it makes little sense for a student to start college already on academic probation. Yet, these students are underprepared for college-level work; that is exactly the reason they were not admitted to URI through the regular process. The summer program is expected to perform both developmental/supportive/educative *and* gatekeeping functions – a fundamental, high-stakes contradiction for which TD program participants pay the price in anxiety about meeting standards on the one hand and diminished opportunities to make up for accumulated educational disadvantages. We heard from students and URI alums about “the cliff” they experienced between the summer program and the start of the first semester, when they realized that the summer program was not like and had not prepared them for “real college.” And we heard from TD program staff and instructors that they, too, felt caught in the dilemma of wanting to offer good preparation for the demands of a public research university while also wanting TD program participants to be successful in the summer program and matriculate to the university.

This dilemma is not unique to URI. A number of summer bridge programs around the country resolve it by using the summer bridge program separate from admissions for selected low-income and/or underrepresented minority students (e.g., TRiO programs). Others forego credit courses and use no- or low-cost summer programs to address developmental coursework prior to regularly admitted students’ enrollment (for example, the Michigan State University Dow STEM Scholars program³⁰, which provides at no cost to students a hybrid developmental math

²⁸ We heard that a number of TD program participants contribute to their family’s income and/or perform substantial care-taking within the household. The opportunity cost of being in Kingston for six weeks may therefore be significant burdens on some students and their families.

²⁹ Regular admissions requires 18 core academic courses, and the TD program requires 13.

³⁰ dowstemscholars.natsci.msu.edu/

program for intended STEM majors). Of the programs like URI's that link admissions to successful summer bridge participation, the Georgia State University Success Academy, a summer-fall-spring learning community³¹, is a model that has shown positive results. Of note, Georgia State (and others, including the University of Michigan Summer Bridge Program³²) rely on summer financial aid eligibility to cover some cost and students are still eligible for fall and spring aid³³. There are successful models for summer programs that have increased fall-to-fall retention of low-income students, and URI has the opportunity to learn from them and to become a leader in this arena.

Recommendations for the summer contingent admissions/bridge program:

- 8.1 Align the goals of this program with the mission of the TD program and a student success philosophy that extends beyond access.
- 8.2 Convene a curriculum council of faculty and advisors from colleges and UCAS to advise on course offerings (both the content and pedagogy) for the TD summer program.
 - 8.2.a Determine by meta-majors (e.g., STEM, humanities, social science) which courses will best prepare students for success (learning and preparation for future courses, grades, credits-toward-degree, etc.).
 - 8.2.b Determine how to address developmental education needs, for example through co-requisites.
 - 8.2.c Quantitative literacy and math preparation, in particular, should be considered, including creative thinking about how to de-couple the risk to students' GPAs with the need for adequate quantitative/math preparation (through, for example, CCRI or other math courses that would not affect URI GPA, or through required but non-credit math programming).
- 8.3 Consider offering courses during both summer sessions.
- 8.4 Explore ways to offer on-campus employment, ideally related to students' academic/professional interests, during the summer.
 - 8.4.a Set aside small grants for faculty researchers and campus support offices to hire TD program participants during the summer program³⁴.
- 8.5 Convene an advisory council for "student success skills/knowledge" summer curriculum (including current and some additional content: college success knowledge and skills, college-level studying strategies, problem-solving approaches, purpose/goal setting, career exploration, and so forth).
 - 8.5.a Benchmark content and delivery (in person, online, asynchronous, required/optional) against leading summer bridge programs.
 - 8.5.b Assess students pre- and post- summer program to ascertain learning of student success skills/knowledge.
- 8.6. Consider a pilot year of decoupling summer course grades from admissions and tuition grant eligibility.

³¹ success.students.gsu.edu/first-year-programs/success-academy/

³² lsa.umich.edu/csp/bridge-programs/summer-bridge-scholars-program.html

³³ The ever-changing nature of federal financial aid requires careful examination of current policy before making changes on campus that will have long-term consequences for students.

³⁴ We heard feedback that this recommendation was unreasonable because it involved more resources. Please see section XI for our rationale for investing in TD program participants. For evidence of on-campus employment effect on persistence, see Brint, S., & Cantwell, A. M. (2010). Undergraduate time use and academic outcomes: Results from the University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey 2006. *Teachers College Record*, 112(9), 2441-2470.

- 8.6.a Educate students and families about the implications of completing summer program below 2.0 (e.g., student begins fall on academic probation, which increases pressure to perform well that term and has implications for eligibility for financial aid).
- 8.6.b Use frequent real-time course data and feedback from instructors to intervene early (as soon as the first week) with students who are not on track to achieve a 2.0 in any course.
- 8.6.c Develop a structured, intensive, personalized protocol for working with any student who begins fall term below a 2.0 to maximize likelihood of positive academic outcomes.
- 8.6.d Develop metrics for determining if this pilot is successful before repeating. Metrics should include number and percent of students who matriculated in fall with a GPA below 2.0 and their outcomes, including subsequent academic performance (grades, credit accumulation, repeat credits) and student loan borrowing.
- 8.7 Consider instituting a residency requirement for students to live on campus throughout the summer program. Note: Recommendation 8.4 regarding providing opportunities for on-campus employment should be considered with any residency requirement.
- 8.8 Deepen and broaden collaboration with college access and success programs (e.g., College Visions, College Crusade of RI, Upward Bound [at RIC]) to ensure coordination of programs and services in the transition from high school to summer program to college.

IX. Academic Year Programs (Advising, Student Development, etc.)

Unlike many student support efforts nationally, the TD program has substantial leverage to ensure that students participate in activities designed for their benefit; if students do not meet program expectations, they risk losing their scholarships. This leverage is currently employed in something of a “one size fits all” model in which all entering TD program participants are expected to fulfill more or less the same responsibilities for weekly meetings with advisors and participation in academic and other support programs (for example, tutoring or Supplemental Instruction), regardless of their individual needs. As noted earlier in this report, it is nearly impossible for current staff to meet weekly with all students individually, especially when considering continuing students in addition to first-year students, in addition to meeting other professional responsibilities for recruiting, admissions, and participation in all-campus committees and so forth. Customizing support for students – or at least beginning a process of segmenting students and customizing support for segments – offers one solution that has been shown to benefit retention and persistence³⁵.

Rethinking the role of TD program advisors – a role that was described to the External Review Team as extending well beyond traditional academic advising into academic coaching, tutoring, problem-solving, crisis management, mentoring, and career coaching – could be a valuable exercise. If UCAS and college/major advisors took responsibility for academic advising, for example, then advisors in the TD program could shift their focus to student support in other areas. There are a number of institutions nationally that could serve as models; a staff field trip

³⁵ See Milliron, M. D., Malcolm, L., & Kil, D. (2014). Insight and action analytics: Three case studies to consider. *Research & Practice in Assessment*, 9 (70-89).

to Purdue to meet with their Student Success staff³⁶ could be instructive. TRiO programs in the region might serve as another example, offering supplemental advising and academic and personal problem-solving strategies to low-income and/or underrepresented students. (See Section IV for additional comments on this topic.)

An active program of predictive analytics and a team-based approach to problem-solving and interventions, as we recommended in Section V (recommendation 5.1) is another approach to distributing responsibility for success of TD program participants across campus. An example of this approach is used at Michigan State University, where Student Success Teams activate networks of professionals and student staff (e.g., residence hall RAs, or peer success coaches) when individual students are in need³⁷. Early academic alert systems that involve instructor feedback in real-time are becoming critical features in student success efforts nationally, but require staff with adequate time to respond quickly to reports; a model in which all students meet with their advisor for 15 minutes a week (as was described to the External Review Team) is not flexible enough to provide more assistance at critical times to the students most in need, and may actually be unnecessary for students who are thriving and connected closely to faculty and advisors elsewhere on campus (e.g., Honors program, departments, student affairs units).

It is not clear what role the TD program has or should have in working with upperclass students in the program, especially once they are admitted to colleges/majors. We see this as a missed opportunity for continued support for student success. Collaboration with academic recovery programs for students on probation or returning from dismissal, with Honors programs to encourage high performance, and with career exploration could be valuable additions to the TD program portfolio, expanding opportunities for students while broadening campus knowledge about the experiences (positive, negative, and neutral) of TD program participants.

The External Review Team was told that for many years, the TD program served as a *de facto* multicultural student support office. The campus now has freestanding Multicultural and Gender & Sexuality Centers, as well as the Office of Community, Equity, and Diversity, which we see as key partners to the TD program. Students and alums reported that many TD program participants feel unprepared to participate in cross-cultural interactions in, for example, residence hall programming, and we identified some resistance on the part of TD program staff to encourage them to do so. The TD program staff; Student Affairs units; Office of Community, Equity, and Diversity; Gender and Sexuality Center; and the Multicultural Center should collaborate to offer programming, freshman orientation experiences, and training for TD program participants to develop skills around cultural competence³⁸. There is abundant expertise on campus to enact a systematic approach, and several professionals who are former TD program staff and, often, former participants, are well positioned to lead this effort in collaboration with the TD program.

³⁶ www.purdue.edu/studentssuccess/specialized/purduepromise/index.html

³⁷ msutoday.msu.edu/news/2016/keeping-students-off-academic-probation/

³⁸ We recognize these topics are included in some programming already, but creating a purposeful curriculum across the TD program experience, from first summer through graduation, would benefit program participants. Of course, other URI students would benefit from additional opportunities to develop these skills, and we are not suggesting that the burden falls exclusively or even primarily on minoritized students to carry campus conversations on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Recommendations for academic year programs:

- 9.1 Convene a cross-unit (e.g., TD program, Multicultural Center, Gender & Sexuality Center, other Student Affairs units, Career Services, UCAS, college advising) committee to develop a multi-year co-curriculum for TD program students.
 - 9.1.a Identify intended learning and developmental outcomes for TD program participants.
 - 9.1.b Identify metrics for assessing co-curriculum
 - 9.1.c Identify implementation strategies (e.g., workshops, integration into courses, advising sessions) and responsible parties/collaborators to achieve intended outcomes.
- 9.2 Create plan using available data and predictive analytics to customize “advising” approach in first year in TD program.
 - 9.2.a Reduce/eliminate duplication with UCAS and college/major advising by shifting academic advising responsibility to UCAS and college/major advisors.
 - 9.2.b Identify functions that *only* TD program staff can do – the unique value added by the program.
 - 9.2.c Incorporate academic early alerts and team-based approach to interventions.
 - 9.2.d Incorporate national best practices in professional support for student success.
- 9.3 Create plan for TD program staff to collaborate with other campus resources on academic recovery for students on probation and those returning from dismissal. Formalize relationships and responsibilities and educate campus about how TD program staff collaborate with others to ensure appropriate support for TD program participants.

X. Assessment of the TD program

Assessment is a vital component of student success work in higher education. Evaluating what interventions/programs/interaction work for which students at what point in their experience from recruitment to graduation provides feedback for ongoing program improvement (including introducing new elements and discontinuing those that do not lead to desired outcomes), for unit-level priority setting, partnership building, and advocacy. Ideally, the TD program will develop a culture of assessment embedded in a larger university culture of assessment, evidence, and data usage. To be clear, “assessment data” includes but is not limited to numbers and statistics; it includes qualitative evidence of student success and program impact.

In keeping with national best practices, benchmarks should be set for every aspect of the TD program: student success, academic program support offerings, number of contacts or touch points with students, partnerships, advising, co-curricular activities, staff development, breadth and depth of collaborations across campus, and so forth. These metrics should exist within a collective impact philosophy to which every staff member, including program leadership, contributes. Establishing common metrics will allow the TD program to identify areas of student obstacles in the journey to degree completion and to find areas for improvement of programs and services.

We observed, however, that both current TD program staff and the supporting university data infrastructure seem unprepared at present to move forward in setting metrics and analytics that can be either automated or made readily available for individual campus users through

dashboards or standardized data pulls. Hiring a TD program staff member to lead assessment is a good first step, but this person will quickly run into the limitations of the current institutional research capabilities that we experienced as an External Review Team requesting data before, during, and after our visit. The impact of these limitations runs well beyond the work of the TD program, and though it is outside the scope of this review to recommend substantial improvements in the overall student data infrastructure at URI, we note that it is not reasonable to expect the TD program staff to perform assessments without ready access to data and the ability to compare groups (for example, to compare TD program participants to the DiMaio scholarship recipients, who may constitute a “near peer” reference group).

We understand that all units within the Division of Student Affairs will undergo regular self-study and external reviews; we applaud this national best practice and appreciate the work of the TD program staff in inaugurating this process on behalf of the Division. Building regular assessment into the operation of the program, so that data are routinely collected and analyzed as a matter of course, will be important to creating and maintaining a culture of assessment within the TD program and the Division. Providing data infrastructure, expertise in data analysis, and ongoing professional development for TD program staff will be essential for actualizing this culture. Being accountable for producing regular assessment results will also support this culture as the TD program becomes a campus leader in using assessment data to improve student success.

Recommendations for assessment of the TD program:

- 10.1 Develop metrics for student success and persistence, including as much historical data for the TD program participant population as is available, and at minimum, data dated to 2000. Some metrics should be descriptive (i.e., not compared to other entering URI students, but compared year-to-year in TD program to look for patterns and improvement). Metrics should include but not be limited to:
 - Pipeline from recruitment to TD program acceptance to pre-matriculation orientation, summer program, and matriculation in first-year class;
 - Performance in summer courses;
 - Performance in fall courses (by course, course combination, overall GPA, and credits attempted/completed);
 - Performance in first-year spring courses (same as previous);
 - Yearly performance (same as previous, plus student debt accrual over time);
 - 4-, 5-, and 6-year graduation rates, disaggregated by college;
 - College/major migration patterns of TD program participants;
 - Academic recovery from probation or return from dismissal for academic reasons; and
 - Outcomes for students who leave URI to transfer to RIC or CCRI.
- 10.2 Create comparison cohort of students, perhaps from the DiMaio scholarship group or some other “near peer” comparison within the university. There is likely to be no identical comparison group, but statistical estimates and controls can be used to create panels for comparisons to identify contributions of TD program participation.
- 10.3 TD programs and services should develop monthly, quarterly, and annual assessment plans and processes. Assessment plans should articulate an ongoing cycle of assessment activities. Plans for programs and services must have access to adequate fiscal, personnel, and technological resources to develop and implement assessment plans.
 - 10.3.a TD assessment plans for programs and services should:
 - specify program goals and intended outcomes;
 - specify student learning and development outcomes;
 - employ multiple measures and methods;

- develop manageable processes for gathering, interpreting, and evaluating data;
- document progress toward achievement of goals and outcomes;
- interpret and use assessment results to demonstrate accountability;
- use assessment results to inform planning and decision-making;
- assess effectiveness of implemented changes;
- provide evidence of improvement of programs and services; and
- report aggregated results to respondent groups and stakeholders.

XI. Resources for the TD Program and TD Program Participants

The External Review Team had limited access to financial information regarding the TD program. We observed various members of the campus community holding different perspectives on the annual cost of the program (for example, one dean said “\$19 million,” a staff member said “\$13 million plus the cost of tuition”). Given the high stakes nature of increasing access and success on campus, it does the TD program little good for the rest of the campus to repeat unverified financial information. Even the Self-Study report is unclear on the actual cost to run the program, as it presents a bullet list on page 14 of “Contributions to the Talent Development Program which are not reported annually or regularly documented.” We concur with the Self-Study report (p.17) in recommending a formal financial audit of the program.

We also suggest that in conversations about the cost of the TD program, campus leaders and TD program leadership and staff distinguish *program* costs (e.g., staff, supplies) for the academic year and summer separately AND *TD program scholarship/tuition* separate from program costs. The myth (we assume, though the financial audit will provide evidence) that the TD program staff spends \$13 million (plus tuition) undermines good will toward the program and the students it serves. Non-URI financial aid (Pell grants, loans, other scholarships) to TD program participants should be reported, as they help place context around and distinguish URI’s contribution, but they are not costs of the TD program; TD program participants who are eligible for federal grants and loans would be eligible if they were not program participants. Lacking the financial audit, we cannot make recommendations about the budget for the TD program, other than to recommend that it is aligned with the mission, size, and scope of the program to support maximum student success.

A concern that was raised repeatedly by students, URI alums who were TD program participants, some faculty, and some non-TD program staff (as well as TD program staff) was that the tuition scholarship covers only standard in-state tuition and not the differential course fees of some colleges/majors. The perception is that some students may change majors into ones that are more affordable because they are fully covered by the tuition scholarship. It is difficult to discern how many students might be influenced, but given the relatively small difference to the university budget of what could be a substantial obstacle to an individual student from a low-income background, it seems reasonable to consider covering tuition in whatever major a student chooses.

Similarly, the cost of books/media/online course keys came up repeatedly as an obstacle to student success. Books/media/course keys are included in the calculation of “cost of attendance,” but in reality, TD program participants reported that they sometimes made decisions about courses and majors based on expected cost of books/materials, or an instructor reported that students may fail to do well in a course because they do not buy the assigned text books, sometimes because of cost. The Rhody Store Charge was cited specifically as an asset

to many students and alums who appreciated the opportunity to pay over time as semester employment income came in; the External Review Team noted the commitment of the Campus Store to making individual arrangements with students for whom monthly payment was a challenge, but students had to approach the manager individually (and know they could do so) to request this consideration. The availability and accessibility of affordable books/media remains a specific concern of students, staff, and many instructors. And while it would be easy for some skeptics to say that college students should prioritize books over cell phone bills or cars on campus, in reality we heard that there are TD program participants and other students who rely on those phones and cars to care for family members upstate, and some who must choose between buying books or paying for food, rent, or bus passes.

With regard to suggesting additional funding for differential tuition or to ensure access to course books/media we point out that considering the other URI investments made in TD program participants (summer tuition, room, and board; academic year tuition; TD program staff/office), as well as state appropriations to the university overall, it could be relatively cost-effective to make these changes. If a student is retained in engineering because the additional course fees are covered and she can buy the books and supplies she needs to succeed, she has higher earning capacity after graduation than if she changed majors to a lower course fee, but lower-paying, field; if she persists to graduation at URI in any major, then URI, state, and federal (e.g., Pell Grant) investment in her education can be realized. If she leaves before earning her degree, nearly all of the investment is lost in terms of economic return to her, the state, and the nation. Indeed she is likely to be in substantial personal debt and have more limited income prospects than if she had persisted to graduation. Incremental increases in investment for student success, therefore, have the potential for disproportionately high return. Put another way: If a \$500 book allowance is linked to retention of a student in whom an additional, say, \$26,000 is being invested by the university, state, and federal governments during the summer program and first year, isn't that \$500 worth it not to lose the \$26,000?

We observed also that there are a number of opportunities to build TD program elements and support for TD program participants into the upcoming capital campaign. Support for students through scholarships and high impact practices (e.g., undergraduate research, internships, study abroad/away) are common components of contemporary university campaigns, and the community of URI alums who participated in the TD program offers a potentially fertile first audience to hear a pitch to support the TD program. Certainly corporate Rhode Island might also be interested in investing in the future workforce through supporting the TD program as well, and the history of local philanthropy in the state is strong. There will no doubt be competing priorities in the campaign, but the External Review Team encourages the group setting priorities for undergraduate education to build some support for the TD program and its participants into the upcoming campaign and into annual giving campaigns as well.

Recommendations for resources for the TD program and TD program participants:

- 11.1 Conduct formal financial audit of the TD program.
- 11.2 Develop communication plan for sharing results of audit and for describing program costs (summer, academic year, program, scholarships, etc.) in the future.
- 11.3 Consider covering students' full tuition and course fees, regardless of major.
- 11.4 Consider ways to ensure that students have access to books/media/course keys.
- 11.5 Convene an advancement team (URI Foundation, TD program leadership, Student Affairs, Academic Affairs, Communications and Marketing, and/or others) to identify and develop TD program opportunities for annual giving, upcoming campaign, and any other appropriate opportunities to increase resources TD program and/or its participants.