

THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF RHODE ISLAND

# REAL JOBS RHODE ISLAND CASE STUDY:

## Design Forward Partnership

Prepared for:

### Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training

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# **Design Forward Partnership**

## **Real Jobs Rhode Island (RJRI)**

In 2015, The Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (DLT) awarded funding to workforce development collaborations throughout the state. Funding was provided through development grants to create sector-based partnerships and create a plan to provide workforce training aimed at sector needs. Implementation funding was then provided for these partnerships to develop training materials and train workers in Rhode Island in targeted industries including healthcare, technology, marine trades, and the arts. Sector partnerships were developed through public private partnerships that included industry, workforce intermediaries, and educational institutions to address the economic needs of the state.

### **I. Sector Need**

The Design Forward Partnership (DFP) was formed to strengthen and support the design sector by increasing exposure to the industry, while helping professionals gain necessary business skills and develop their careers. Through an online survey of 49 respondents, a focus group with twenty participants, and five individual interviews funded by a RJRI Planning Grant, the partnership specifically found that:

- Companies in need of design professionals were seeking employees that possessed strategic skills, visual and verbal communication ability, creative problem solving skills, and business acumen in addition to technical design skills.
- Ninety-two percent of those surveyed wanted to hire locally, but 56 percent of those respondents reported a gap between the skills they sought in applicants and the actual skills of local designers.
- The design sector is not recognized as a major economic driver, yet it has a ubiquitous presence in numerous other industries, such as manufacturing, defense, and the marine trades.
- Demand for the skills of the sector is rapidly growing, but young talent trained at institutions such as the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) are leaving the state for jobs in larger cities causing a “brain drain” in the design sector.
- Independent design contractors want to grow their businesses but lack the business skills and staff support to do so. Further, without competent employees handling their client base, small contractors are unable to dedicate the time and effort necessary to grow their businesses.

### **II. Grant History**

DESIGNxRI is an organization seeking to promote the state’s design industry to attract business opportunities and grow design jobs in the state. It formed in 2012 and features a partner committee structure that includes representatives from all disciplines of the design industry (e.g.,

architecture, graphic arts, etc.) as well as a traditional board of directors. The organization's partner committee members include the American Institute of Architects RI (AIAri), American Institute for Graphic Arts RI (AIGA-RI), American Society of Landscape Architects-RI (ASLA-RI), Industrial Designers Society of America RI (IDSari), International Interior Design Association (IIDA), and American Society of Interior Designers New England (ASIDNE). The organization also frequently partners with RISD and the City of Providence on its initiatives.

DESIGNxRI hesitated to establish a program with Real Jobs funding because it did not have prior experience working with the unemployed population and was unsure how a government-funded training program could meet the needs of the design sector. After learning more about the RJRI program, however, DESIGNxRI recognized a need for professional development in the design field and applied for, and was awarded, a planning grant. The planning grant, which allowed the partnership to conduct a survey, form an industry focus group, and conduct individual interviews, brought industry partners together to assess the skills needed in the design sector workforce. The resulting feedback allowed the partnership to design training programs and to seek input and feedback about the training programs through RISD, acting as the partnership's education consultant, to help guide the training programs to final form.

### **III. Goals and Objectives**

The DFP's goal was to strengthen and support the design sector through skills and career development. It wanted to ensure that existing designers were adapting to emerging trends, emerging designers had access to the support and training needed for success, and that future members of the design sector were aware of the various design career pathways and the skills needed to pursue them. To achieve these aims, the DFP specified three goals:

1. Cultivate a talent pipeline of high school-aged students and educate them early about their potential to hone creative skills into future high-paying jobs.
  - The DFP's Advance Design Talent program was created to address this goal.
2. Reach design talent early as students graduate from college and retain talent in Rhode Island by revealing local professional work opportunities and growing the professional skills of post-graduates.
  - The DFP's Post-Graduate Design Fellowship was created to address this goal.
3. Support designers already in their careers to meet the fast changing needs of the sector.
  - The DFP's Career Exploration Program was created to address this goal.

### **IV. Partnership**

DESIGNxRI had extensive prior experience working with companies and contractors in the design industry, and reached out to these partners during the planning grant phase to seek feedback on program design. Taylor Box Company, Orange Square, DownCity Design, Ximedica, and Bradford Soap Works were all part of this initial planning team, and stayed on as members during the implementation phase. In addition, KITE Architects, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island, and RISD Continuing Education joined the DFP for the implementation phase.

Bradford Soap Works played perhaps the largest role of all of the partners. Prior to joining the Design Forward partnership, it was already working with DESIGNxRI to train a cohort of designers in company-specific packaging design and strategic design skills that could be applied to careers with the numerous companies affiliated with Bradford. Its involvement in the DFP was an example of the value of independent design consultants to companies and the value of skills training to possible participants.

**Table 1: Partnership Members and Responsibilities**

DESIGNxRI	Lead Applicant: convenor and project manager: responsible for ensuring project completion and providing fiscal management and oversight; providing participant and partnership management; leading recruitment efforts for both employers and employees.
DownCity Design	Responsible for leading the development and implementation of training modules; helping identify training instructors.
RISD Continuing Education	Educational consulting partner; advisor for training modules: responsible for providing advice in the development of the curriculum and trainings; identifying training instructors.
Taylor Box Company, Orange Square, Bradford Soap Works, KITE Architects, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island, Ximedita.	Responsible for helping create the training programs; sending employees to trainings; agreeing to host design fellows.

## **V. Implementation Activities and Processes**

The DFP designed three training programs to fulfill its stated goals. Each program addressed a separate aspect of the design sector and served different worker populations. However, the DFP planned meetings and workshops that brought training participants from all three programs to the same place, which created a sense of connection between the training programs and offered all participants mentoring, networking, and socializing opportunities.

The first program was the Advance Design Program, which was aimed at incumbent workers, specifically mid-career design professionals (those anywhere between their second or third year as a professional to those firmly established as industry leaders). It aimed to improve the professional skills of program participants, such as business, presentation, and facilitation skills. From its employer partners, the DFP drew participants who were asked to complete a self-assessment of their design skills and a questionnaire that gauged their interest in skill development and participation in the training program. Participants accepted into the four month training program met once a month for trainings, and at other times for social and peer mentoring. The program curriculum contained modules on presentation, facilitation, user experience, and Design Thinking for Innovation, a methodology used to solve complex problems and to find innovative solutions for clients.

The second program was the Post-Graduate Design Fellowship, also known as the Emerge program. This program was designed to entice a cohort of ten new, young designers to remain in Rhode Island after graduation for a one-year position with a participating employer partner. However, the DFP modified its plan to focus on professional development seminars offered once monthly for five months because it was not yet confident in being able to place interns with companies. The Emerge program also enabled young designers just breaking into the field to gain experience and access to mentors. To recruit for this program, the DFP relied on its connections with Rhode Island's colleges and universities, including RISD, Roger Williams University, Rhode Island College, the University of Rhode Island, and Johnson and Wales University. Interested applicants completed an online form and their design portfolio underwent screening by industry partners. Selected candidates were then invited to take part in an initial interview. During the interview, candidates completed a test that assessed their on-the-spot design skills and filled out a questionnaire about their interest in the fellowship. Those who were chosen as Fellows also met monthly for professional development seminars that addressed communication and presentation skills, legal advice for emerging designers, innovation through the Design Thinking process, user-centered design, business development and budgeting, professionalism and prioritization, facilitation skills, giving and receiving feedback, and portfolio design.

The final training program, the Career Exploration Program, also known as the Explore program, targeted 14-18 year-old students to increase their exposure to the design sector and improve their design skills. The DFP relied on DownCity Design's connections with local high schools to identify program recruits, and chose participants based on their answers to written questions about their interest and/or experience in design or other creative fields. Selected

students participated in a six-week summer program that focused on graphic design, industrial / product design, and architectural design in three two-week, 40-hour programs where participants were provided a \$625 stipend to offset summer employment needs. The program was designed primarily to introduce participants to concepts and skills in design rather than teach technical skills. For the graphic design portion, participants learned about graphic design careers, the elements and principles of graphic design, and were introduced to Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Editor. For the architectural design portion, students received an overview of careers in architecture and were taught about the design process, site mapping and precedent studies, drawing conventions, and prototyping. Students were also introduced to Google SketchUp Pro. Finally, the industrial design portion taught students about industrial design careers, the design process, precedent studies, idea generation and sketching, and prototyping. The section also included an introduction to SolidWorks 3D modeling software. Participants concluded each training subject with projects for their professional portfolio.

## **VI. Achievements**

### Partnerships

#### *Established convenor*

DESIGNxRI is an organization that has been involved in the design sector since its creation, and had established partnerships in the design sector long before forming a Real Jobs partnership. Its prior connections and experience made it easier for the organization to reach out to employer partners, tap into the real needs of the sector, and to arrange meetings with employer partners.

#### *Close relationship with sector partners*

DESIGNxRI's close relationship with its sector partners made engagement and cooperation within the partnership very easy. Further, DESIGNxRI fulfilled its goal of expanding the partnership by adding KITE Architects, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island, and RISD Continuing Education to the implementation phase of the partnership.

### Recruitment

#### *Strong recruitment*

The DFP has not experienced difficulties recruiting program participants, despite the fact that most of its participants had waited until the deadline to enroll. The DFP attributes this procrastination to last minute decision making by employers who struggled to decide whether to send employees to training and which employees would be sent. The DFP also exceeded its recruitment goals for all three programs as a result. Recruitment for the Advance Design Program was so successful that the DFP had more applicants than available spaces in the training program. The successful recruitment for this program was due, in part, to DownCity Design's relationship with the Rhode Island Department of Education and the Providence school system.

### *Individual outreach*

The DFP sought out schools and companies one-by-one to form relationships. As a result of this individual attention, the DFP formed stronger ties with these partners and relied on them for consistent recruitment.

### *Exceeding recruitment goals*

The DFP met and exceeded its recruitment goals for all three of its programs, recruiting eighteen participants for the Advance Design Program, thirteen for the Design Fellowship, and eighteen for the Explore program. The 49 recruited participants across these three programs exceeded the partnership's planned recruitment total of 43 participants.

### Trainee Barriers

#### *Workday training*

The Advance Design Programs were primarily offered during the day, which allowed participants to receive a work release from their employers to attend the training while suffering no serious consequences for missing work. The DFP partly attributed this employer cooperation to the fact that training was offered at no cost due to RJRI grant funding. Thus, the DFP's training offered a way for employers to upskill their workers at no cost. Further, the DFP noticed that employers were genuinely excited about supporting the DFP and their employees through training programs.

#### *Offering a stipend for summer training*

The Career Exploration Program offered a stipend of \$625 to its participants as a way to offset wages that were forfeited from the traditional summer work that participants may have otherwise pursued. Since the training serves many low-income students, this was a significant factor in attracting interested recruits to the program and maintaining students in the program once accepted.

### Training

#### *Participants trained*

The DFP experienced no attrition among participants who took the training. Of the 49 participants enrolled across the Advance, Explore, and Emerge training programs, 49 participants completed them. This exceeded the partnership's planned completion total of 43 graduates.

#### *Positive feedback from program participants*

The DFP has received extensive positive feedback from a survey it distributed to program participants. Participants who completed the survey reported having felt empowered and having gained valuable skills due to the training. The DFP views this feedback as a critical sign of the program's success.



### Transition from Training to Employment

The DFP did not discuss any achievements pertaining to the transition from training to employment.

### Other

#### *Collaboration within a diverse industry*

The DFP's training programs helped to bring together different parts of the design industry that do not usually intersect to help create and implement its training programs. The DFP believes this helped the design sector work together and realize the value of learning from the diversity of the industry.

**Table 2: Performance Metrics**

<b>IG-27 Design Forward (DesignxRI)</b>	<b>Start Date of First Cohort</b>	<b>Proposed End Date for All Cohorts</b>	<b>Target Enrollment</b>	<b>Enrolled</b>	<b>Target Completed</b>	<b>Completed</b>
<b>Recruitment, Training, and Employment</b>						
Design Industry Training: ADVANCE (Incumbents)	5/13/16	8/12/16	15	18	15	18
Design Industry Training: EXPLORE (Youth)	7/5/16	8/12/16	18	18	18	18
Design Industry Training: EMERGE (Interns)	11/9/16	3/24/17	10	13	10	13
Participants that enter employment after EMERGE training					10	2
<b>Other Objectives</b>						
New Employer Partners					6	6

## **VII. Challenges**

### Partnerships

The DFP did not discuss any challenges related to its partnerships.

### Recruitment

The DFP did not discuss any challenges with its recruitment.

### Trainee Barriers

The DFP did not discuss any challenges related to trainee barriers.

### Training

#### *Underdeveloped placement strategy for the fellowship*

The DFP wanted to place fellows with companies for a year of training, but felt that its placement efforts were not adequate to fully support both the companies and the trainees. As a result, the DFP modified the Fellowship program by removing the internship portion of training and focused instead on offering workshops and professional development in five sessions.

#### *Absences*

The DFP faced challenges regarding program attendance. No formal incentives were established for attending class sessions even though missing one training session amounted to missing a good portion of the training content. The DFP is designing make-up sessions to mitigate this issue, and will promise participants a certificate of completion at the conclusion of training.

#### *Developing an appropriate curriculum*

The DFP struggled to work with an education partner to deliver a business education module. Despite several attempts to revise the curriculum, the content delivered did not meet the DFP's expectations.

### Transition from Training to Employment

#### *Implementing new skills*

Program graduates are pleased with the strategic skills they learned in the DFP's training programs, but have reported that there is no room to use these new skills in the workplace. Graduates have found that despite the sector's stated interest in strategic, business-oriented workers, most design work is still skill and outcome-oriented. The DFP plans to conduct more industry outreach to help companies learn how the new skills of these workers can be maximized.

### Other

### *Staff capacity*

The DFP struggled implementing the training programs with its current level of staffing. The staff of DESIGNxRI was responsible for project implementation on top of managing their other responsibilities, finding themselves overwhelmed during the implementation process.

## **VIII. Sustainability**

The DFP modeled the structure of its training programs after successful programs in other industries, and designed the program to be sustainable on funding streams other than RJRI, such as local foundation support or federal grant funds. To that end, the DFP believes that if the program is successful and proves valuable to the sector in its first three years, sector employers will contribute funds or pay training tuition to support the continuation of the programs after RJRI funding ends. The DFP also believes that local foundation support or federal funding will also be forthcoming if the program proves to be a success.

Further, the DFP has plans to expand its training program to a wider audience. Starting in 2017, individual modules of the Advance Design Program will be opened to interested members of the industry as individual professional development seminars.

## **IX. Lessons Learned**

The following lessons were learned by the DFP in executing its training program:

- Offer business-focused training to meet a new industry need for businesses and contractors trained in business skills.

## **X. Best Practices**

These best practices were utilized by the DFP:

- Incorporate social events into training to increase exposure of trainees to sector professionals and introduce companies to a talented new hiring pool.
- Target training programs at multiple populations and tailor the program to fit the different needs and skills gaps of each of these populations.
- Address needs at all levels of the industry, not just on training or attracting new workers.
- Include employers in the application process to give employers more control over who they train and solidify support for the DFP and its training programs.
- Offer a stipend for summer work to encourage participation and reduce barriers to participation for lower-income students.
- Retain the contact information of potential applicants who were unable to participate in the first round of the program and reach out to them during the next round of recruitment.

## **XI. Recommendations**

Based on the successes and challenges of the Design Forward Partnership, the following recommendations are suggested:

- Hire a dedicated program director to oversee implementation through the partnership.
- Offer hybrid or online learning opportunities to program participants so that participants can still receive course content in light of absences, or so that the delivery of the curriculum is more flexible.