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RWU's New 'Rising Tide' of Educational Opportunity

With a new campus in downtown Providence and a revolutionary focus on the city's neediest residents, RWU aims to reinvigorate the workforce – and maybe even the economy



Photo by: Oggi Photography

By: Public Affairs Staff

September 8, 2016

PROVIDENCE – At a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Thursday formally opening its new downtown campus, Roger Williams University showcased the school's growing impact on the city's social and economic fabric – from helping ex-convicts reintegrate into their communities, to delivering college credits to inner-city high school students, to keeping the lights on for poor families in medical distress.

With the inauguration of the campus at One Empire Street, Roger Williams is expanding its presence in the heart of the state to fulfill its mission of strengthening society through engaged teaching and learning. And in doing so, RWU will build the university the world needs now by opening the doors of opportunity to those who have been historically marginalized and unable to gain access to higher education, according to RWU President Donald J. Farish.

"It's a new model – a private university with a public purpose," Farish said. "We're deliberately focusing on increasing the educational success of people less fortunately positioned in the income spectrum."

This approach, Farish said, involves providing a new kind of student – the sort often overlooked in the traditional model of leafy suburban residential campuses – with the skills necessary to obtain a well-paying job and contribute productively to the city and state economy.

“We want to create tools for access to people in the bottom half of the economy so they can assume positions that pay better,” Farish added. “We want to see the economy of the state rise as a consequence of a better employed workforce. We want to close the skills gap. We want to give people the opportunity to take pride in their lives and feel that they can support their families, and that their children have a future.”

Through partnerships with a multitude of community organizations, nonprofits, public school districts, and federal, state and local governments, Roger Williams has already begun opening those doors. Take for example, Farish said, 15-year-old Ruben Rodriguez, who is working toward earning 15 college credits while a sophomore at [Juanita Sanchez Educational Complex](#) via RWU’s [Community Development Program](#).

For working professionals who lack college credentials or ex-convicts seeking a path toward a better life, two recent graduates spoke about how the University has made a difference in their lives.

A young professional at [West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation](#), Kelia Bravo ’15 completed a bachelor’s degree in community development, a certificate in municipal management and graduated with a President’s Core Values Medallion award, while working two jobs, dealing with the death of her sister and thyroid cancer.

“There’s a support system at Roger Williams that I never had before,” Bravo said. “I had a place to grow professionally, build options for me for future success, meet classmates that would become colleagues, and a home with open doors that whenever I needed advice would be there for me.”

With his release from incarceration approaching, Justin Thomas searched for opportunities to create a fulfilling life but found most doors closed. Until he was introduced to [Pivot the Hustle](#), a partnership of the RWU Professional Education Center and the Rhode Island Department of Corrections that helps inmates gain skills to successfully re-enter the workforce.

“They saw what I like to believe is my shining light, and they gave me a chance to express it,” said Thomas, who became the first person on probation in Rhode Island to work for [AmeriCorps](#). “They gave me the opportunity to tell my story and not be afraid to come to an employer and say, ‘These are the mistakes I’ve made and this is how I would like to grow and move on in my future.’ This is a program that saves lives, saves families, and builds communities, and I’m so thankful for it.”

These two recent graduates represent the new direction taken by the [School of Continuing Studies](#) – which, along with the [School of Law](#), will offer a significant presence in downtown – of widening access for people who have yet to explore what avenues their careers might take, said Dean Jamie Scurry.

“We are all about meeting the students where they are – creating programs with dozens of urban and corporate partners developing customized education and training for Rhode Island’s future workforce,” Scurry said. “Our program provides services that students need – for example, enabling active-duty military to participate in classes online from any point around the world; or providing credits toward [degree completion and certificate programs for inmates](#) serving at the ACI.”

The Providence campus is also home to RWU Law's Experiential Campus, housing clinics for the state's only law school and providing free services to those in need. Resources include the school's own Criminal Defense, Immigration, Business Start Up, Veteran's Benefits Appeal clinics, as well as organizations such as the Pro Bono Collaborative and the [Rhode Island Center for Justice](#). Through these clinics, RWU Law students provide approximately 20,000 hours of free legal services to low-income individuals and families, according to RWU Law Dean Michael Yelnosky.

"This is the only place in the city and the only place in the state where law students provide free legal services to the less fortunate," Yelnosky said. "We created these programs to increase the supply of lawyers trained in public interest law in an effort to do something about our country's and our state's massive justice gap – a gap that exists because low-income individuals do not know about their rights or cannot find a lawyer to represent them."

RWU will also use its new space in Providence to cultivate its service mission, partnering with and housing a diverse cadre of non-profit organizations such as [Grow Smart RI](#), the [Latino Policy Institute](#), and [Housing Works RI](#), among others, as well to serving as an incubator for community development programming models such as [Unified Solutions](#).

All of these partnerships demonstrate the collaborative fabric woven among the University and its neighbors in an effort to create a more educated workforce that will strengthen the entire state, according to Farish.

"Roger Williams isn't doing this work alone," Farish said. "We're working with the state, federal, local governments, with nonprofit organizations, with individuals who are invested in the success of their own communities, with corporations. No one entity can change the economic future of the state, but together we can."