

## Only a small percentage of low-income students enroll in college. Is there a cost effective way to boost enrollment?

### The Challenge

Every child deserves an equal opportunity to succeed, but access to higher education varies greatly by socioeconomic status. College attendance is associated with improved long-term outcomes such as social mobility, economic wellbeing, health, happiness, and lifespan. Despite these benefits, the national immediate college enrollment rate gap between low- and high-income students was 20 percentage points in 2015. Existing research on need-based scholarships shows that even for large scholarship amounts, results are moderate at best with substantial costs attached.

In Rhode Island, only 47% of residents have a post-secondary degree or credential. Governor Gina Raimondo identified college access as a high priority, with the goal of achieving 70% postsecondary attainment in RI by 2025. She asked RIPL to design an effective and efficient way to improve college access for low-income students.

### Understanding What Works and Why

We used data from Rhode Island and on-the-ground fieldwork to identify how to improve college access.

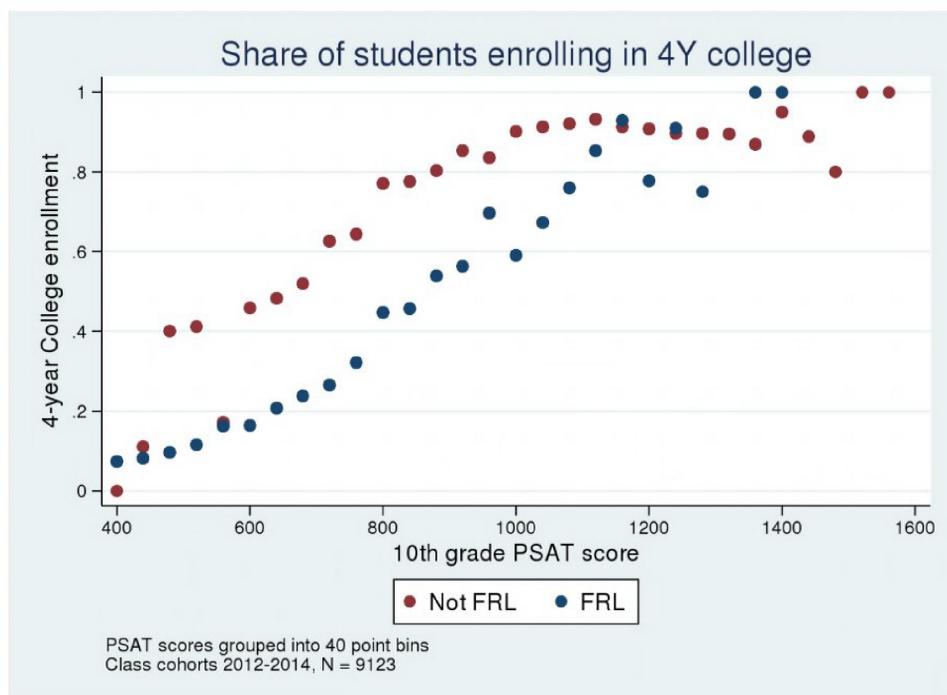


Figure 1: College Going in Rhode Island

We found that low-income students enroll in college at a lower rate than higher-income students conditional on meeting and achieving important milestones like the PSAT™. They miss important college milestones along the way -- academic achievement does not appear to drive whether low-income students meet important milestones to prepare them for successful applications and enrollment.

From focus grouping high school students, we found that even highly motivated students find the college application process to be confusing and overwhelming. Low-income students also often face hard trade-offs, such as whether they should spend an extra hour at their hourly job or spend time studying for the SAT®.

### Introducing Rhode2College

To solve these challenges, RIPL brought together public and private partnerships to design *Rhode2College* (R2C): a step-by-step, achievement-focused program designed to give junior and senior high school students the tools they need to succeed on the path to college. The program is a partnership between RIPL, the College Board, the Rhode Island Department of Education, the Rhode Island Governor's Office, and First Data Corporation. Here's how it works:

- R2C rewards students for completing college milestones.** Each month, the program sends students information about a college preparation milestone to complete, and rewards them for completing it. Students can earn up to \$2,000 over their junior and senior year of high school while completing milestones.
- Immediate and long-term rewards help students stay on track for the long haul.** R2C encourages both short- and long-term progress on college goals by giving some money to students immediately, and some in a savings account they can access upon enrolling in college.
- R2C is low-cost, light-touch, and high-impact.** Students text with an Artificial Intelligence (AI) chatbot, which provides 24/7 support for college-related questions and questions about their milestones. The chatbot informs students of their progress and total amount earned in R2C, reminds students of upcoming deadlines, and forwards any questions it cannot answer to R2C administrators.

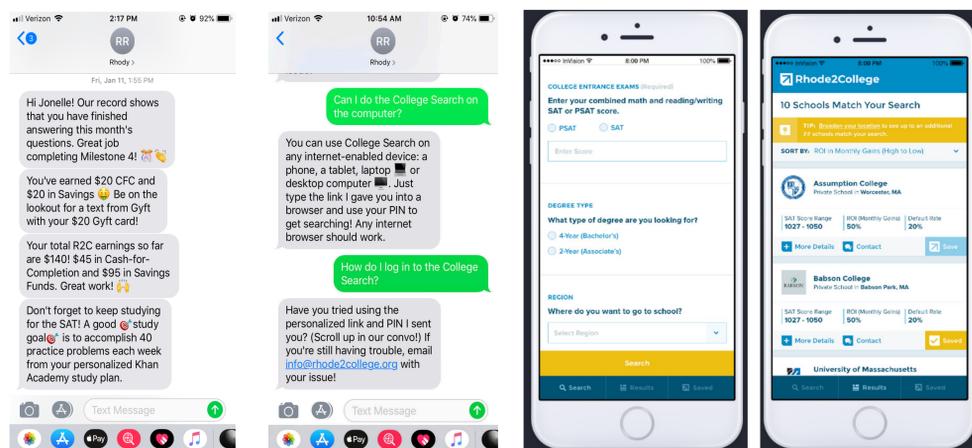


Figure 2: Examples of the AI chatbot and College Search, one of the Rhode2College milestones designed to help students search for colleges that match their goals.

Students are eligible if are enrolled in a RI public high school, including charter schools, begin their junior year in the Fall of 2018, are enrolled in a free- and reduced-price (FRL) lunch program, and scored in the top 25% of all RI FRL students on the PSAT™10. This year's cohort had a 60% program takeup rate, with 700 students enrolled out of 1150 eligible students in Rhode Island.

### Solving College Barriers Across the Country

At a cost of about \$2,000 per student in scholarship funds, R2C is a financially feasible, easily managed model for states to increase college enrollment and reduce inequality. R2C is easily scalable and ready for fast implementation across states, with significant potential to increase college-going among low-income youth.