Katy Oliveira (00:07):

Welcome to Next Practices Data-Informed Strategies to Shape the Future of Higher Ed. In each episode, you'll hear from transformational higher ed leaders on how they're tackling today's most pressing challenges to make a difference for their students and institutions. I'm your host, Katy Oliveira.

Allison Chase Padula (00:28):

We work really closely with our students who struggle in their first semester. And so we have a program in the second semester of their first year, which is an academic skills enrichment program, and that's been staffed with folks from all over campus who have volunteered to work with these students to help them get to where they need to be. And so having first year advisors will mean that students will be working with the person that they've already gotten to know this entire year. So provide continuity and hopefully a deeper relationship with those first year advisors.

Katy Oliveira (01:03):

In this episode, I'm talking with Alison Chase Padula, Assistant Provost for Student Success at Roger Williams University. We discuss how this liberal arts institution is navigating the enrollment cliff, mental health crisis, and enduring impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. We also talk about their transition from faculty advising model to a first year professional advising model and how student success analytics and intelligent case management software enable faculty and staff to deliver proactive student support. But before we dive in, take a moment to subscribe to the show to stay up to date on the latest creative data informed approaches to student success.

(01:49):

Welcome to Next Practices. Alison. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to share your experience and wisdom with us today.

Allison Chase Padula (01:59):

Thank you so much for having me.

Katy Oliveira (02:00):

I would like to get started by giving you a minute to introduce yourself, if you would take a little time to tell us who you are and your background in higher ed.

Allison Chase Padula (02:11):

Sure. So I'm Alison Chase Padula. I'm the Assistant Provost for Student Success at Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island. I'm actually in my 22nd year at the university and have had a number of roles throughout that time here, including time in student life and the president's office, and now in academic affairs. My role at the institution is actually very unique in the sense that it was created and I'm the first person to be in this role to specifically work on how do we bridge the gap between student affairs and academic affairs work and look at student success more broadly institutionally. So I've been in this role for about six years now, and in that time we've really come to think about student success and thriving as core to our mission here. And so my work, I'm really passionate about student success work, students are the reason I first got into higher ed and as I've had many different roles throughout my career, I've always come back to the place of how do we support students and, and how do we provide a caring, compassionate community for them. So really excited to be, uh, talking about some of our work with you here today.

Katy Oliveira (03:23):

Well, thank you so much for coming on. I'm excited to talk more about it as well. So let's just dive right in and get down into the nitty gritty. I'd like to start by talking, just having you kind of paint a picture for us about your institution. What are your strategic priorities and what are you finding are some of the most pressing challenges that you're trying to solve with those priorities?

Allison Chase Padula (03:48):

Sure. Roger Williams University, which is in Bristol, Rhode Island, is a liberal arts institution, but unique in the sense that we also have professional schools. So we have Rhode Island's only law school as part of our campus. We also have a school of architecture and engineering, computing and construction management and a business school. Um, so when you combine those things together, I just think it makes such a rich environment for students and their learning. We've always been an institution that's been really student focused, and I mean that in the best way for a long time, we, we would say we were small. We're not so small anymore. I would think we're a little bit more right-sized, medium-sized now with about 3,700 undergrads. And then when you fold in the law school and and graduate students, and also our campus in Providence, which has a mission to really serve a really wide population of students where probably over the 5,000, 6,000 enrollment, the challenges that we're facing here are, are probably the challenges that lots of institutions are facing right now.

(04:54):

Certainly the decline in birth, <laugh>, the folks who are gonna be eligible and ready to come to institutions like ours in the future. And we're certainly seeing that decline, right? And so we've been talking about that for a very long time here on campus. How do we prepare for those demographic changes that are really going to impact an institution like ours? So that's something that's, um, at the forefront of our thinking right now. And because we've been more of a traditional aged residential community, it it's really forced people to think about that in different ways. You know, how do we become an institution that offers more opportunities beyond just that traditional experience that, you know, the 18 to 22 year olds. So for us, that's been a really big focus. I think the other piece is being located in the Northeast that impacts us even greater, right? And so when you look at that, that birth rate decline in the students who are, are going to be looking for higher education, the numbers in the northeast shrink considerably in the Northeast. We've seen a number of small institutions close in the last few years. The pandemic, you know, sent shockwaves through all of us. And so now thinking about really what is our mission, what's our plan for the future and how do we get ready for those students has been I think the biggest challenge for us.

Katy Oliveira (06:16):

Yeah, sure. That pending enrollment cliff, which we knew was gonna happen, but was accelerated by the pandemic.

Allison Chase Padula (06:24):

Well, and I think the pandemic left us with, you know, so many added questions. You know, what is the role of online learning? What's the role of hybrid? Seeing more students who wanna be closer to home, so they may be looking at commuting. And for an institution like us where most of our students live on campus, that's really been a big thing to grapple with is like, what does that look like if we're suddenly supporting a considerable amount more of commuters? What is that looking like for students who may be found after the pandemic that they don't wanna be on campus and they wanna be at home? Right? And so we really struggled during that time with finding ways for students to have some online opportunities, but that's not who we are as an institution. We're not, we weren't set up for that. We still believe very strongly in the experience of being on campus and, and being in the classroom, but it has made us think about we need to have some more flexible options for students. And it's, it's been an exciting conversation. I don't think we have all the answers on, on how to do that yet, but it has made us look at preparing for the future students that are coming to Roger Williams.

Katy Oliveira (07:32):

Yeah, and I think that's a great segue into talking a little bit more about how your team is thinking and organizing student success around these new needs around this demographic shift around the kind of

shift in what students are looking for from a college experience at the end of the day has changed. I'd love to hear about how your team is thinking about that, their approach and, and organizing.

Allison Chase Padula (07:57):

Sure. So I think one of the things, um, that was a huge benefit for us is that we embarked on a vision and strategic planning process kind of almost at the same time as, as the pandemic, which presented all sorts of unique challenges trying to do that when we were remote and, and not on campus. But what it allowed us to do was to really think about what is the mission of our institution, looking at our mission statement again and, and getting everybody on board with what that looks like. And then the vision and strategic planning process really helped us as an institution to identify the core areas that we felt like, yes, this is what we want everyone to be looking at when they're making plans within their own departments on campus. And that we also wanna make sure that folks outside of the institution have a sense for who is a Roger Williams student and how's that campus operating?

(08:54):

And so we did a very intensive strategic planning process that involved folks from basically all over campus. We had groups that were working independently and then more together a little bit later on in the process to identify what were the steps that were going to get us to those places. And it was really invigorating in many ways. It was challenging in many ways because it really, you know, when everybody makes that list of what are the things that most important to us, right? Different areas are all kind of vying for, well, I wanna make sure you know, the things that are, that are important in my work in my department are showing up in that. And so we ended up focusing in on five core areas, which were academic excellence, engaged learning, student success, having a thriving community and sustainable futures as where, not to say other things aren't important, but these are the things that we really wanna put our efforts into.

(09:51):

And selfishly from my role, having student success called out so prominently in our strategic planning was really invigorating <laugh>. And it, I think allowed me to, I've been saying for a long time that just because I'm in charge of student success in retention work doesn't mean I alone do that. Right? I have a really amazing team of folks within the Center for Student Academic Success, which I oversee here. I have really amazing colleagues in the faculty and the staff and great folks in student life. But more, I think across campus, everyone needs to see their role in retention work, right? Whether you're teaching in the classroom or you're the person who's preparing dinner for the students in a dining hall, this is like all hands on deck work. And so having it as part of our strategic plan, I think really made people think about in all of the areas, are we putting our priorities and our efforts to making sure that students are successful?

(10:49):

And one of the things I would mention that was really important in those conversations is that we were also doing a diversity, equity and inclusion plan, right? So we have an equity plan that kind of started before the pandemic, and then as we did strategic planning, we made sure that all of those plans were in alignment. And so diversity, equity, inclusion isn't one of those core things that I just called out, but yet more importantly, it's in every single one of those things. So we talk about it as it relates to student success. So all of those plans having come together, I think aligned everybody in thinking, okay, this is, this is how we move things forward and this is where we really wanna focus on for the next several years.

Katy Oliveira (11:34):

Yeah. And out of that thinking and planning, was there a combination of approaches, strategies, initiatives that emerge that you're finding are, are already making a difference for your students, or you anticipate will make a big difference for your students going forward?

Allison Chase Padula ([11:51](#)):

Absolutely. So I think we've always been known as a very supportive institution. It's one of the things that's often called out, so students feel like they can turn to several different areas on campus for assistance. So I think certainly within our tutoring support services, we have a really robust tutoring center that provides assistance in several different disciplines. We also have a very strong disability support services here in our student accessibility services office. But one of the things that we've been looking at for several years is how do we ensure that students are having the right conversations throughout their career to plant, not only for just what they're doing from semester to semester and picking their classes, but really thinking about skill development and career readiness. And so we have had a very prescribed model of faculty advising and students have a faculty advisor assigned to them by major if they've declared a major.

([12:50](#)):

And that person works with them on selecting their classes and giving them advice on their experience here. And what we've seen over the years is that first year students need so much more, right? And so we've really struggled with how do we make sure we have added supports in for them? And so we've added extra support in our fall orientation program, which is a kind of a part two of orientation. They come in June, but then when they move in, we do a whole nother orientation for them. We've had different layers of a first year kind of class to help them focus on strategies and, and things they need. And also to build some community with them. For this year, our faculty have just passed a first year seminar plan, which I'm really excited about that's going to allow students to pick a seminar topic that they're really excited on.

([13:42](#)):

And the faculty that'll be teaching those seminars are going to be trained and have identified themselves as folks who really wanna be supportive to first year students. So they'll get the best of both worlds. They'll be in an academic class for credit, but also discussing all the transition issues that are important to them as first year students. So we're super excited about that. And then the other plan that we're launching is that we're gonna be moving to a first year advising model, which means that students will be working with somebody who is specifically targeting the areas that we know that students need more help in in their first year. And that will be out of the advising office. And then as students move into their second year, they'll move into somebody in the discipline that they'll be majoring in. So what we're hoping it'll do for us is allow us to spend a little bit more time with our first year students on those developmental issues that we know are so important to them, and give faculty some more time and space to work with sophomores and above who need to be having very different conversations about the discipline and the field and how do they prepare themselves for that.

([14:47](#)):

So we're excited to be launching that for this coming year. And certainly Civitas Learning tools will be a big part of that. They wanna make sure that we're giving those first year advisors and the rest of our faculty advisors the tools necessary to be able to communicate with their students easily and be looking for those students who might need some more support or some more challenge. So those I think, are the two really big initiatives for us this year that we're excited to see what kind of impact that'll have on our first year students.

Katy Oliveira ([15:17](#)):

That's very exciting. Um, those of you have been listening for a while know this about me already, but Alison, you may not. My background is in higher ed and I led out a first year advising department at a liberal arts institution here in Austin, Texas. And so I'm very familiar with that work. And so I cannot help but ask what kind of advising model did you initially have that you're, that you're now moving to this kind of advising just to see the, the contextual difference?

Allison Chase Padula (15:45):

Sure. So it was a total faculty advising model. So students were assigned somebody based on a discipline, the major area that they were interested in. If they were undecided, they worked specifically with our dean of general education and some other faculty members who were more comfortable with working with the students who really have no idea sometimes or sometimes have an idea, but they're not really ready to say they have that idea, right? So it's been faculty model and we're not saying that we're moving faculty out of it, just point the opposite. We wanna make sure that the students get what they need in their first year around all these other skills that they need. And then in their sophomore through senior year, to be able to really focus in with the faculty on, on the issues that faculty are in the best position to be giving students advice on, right?

(16:33):

The field preparing for internships, jobs, what classes they think would make students have a better experience to prepare for that career later on. So it's a little bit different of an approach. We're still looking as our faculty as those key mentors and relationship builders for our students and looking for ways that, you know, those first year advisors will be working with faculty colleagues to introduce students to majors and and different schools on campus. But it does allow us to, to kind of really hone in a bit more on those transition skills of developmental issues. We work really closely with our students who struggle in their first semester. And so we have a program in the second semester of their first year, which is an academic skills enrichment program. And that's been staffed with folks from all over campus who have volunteered to work with these students to help them get to where they need to be. And so having first year advisors will mean that students will be working with the person that they've already gotten to know this entire year. So it'll provide continuity and hopefully a deeper relationship with those first year advisors.

Katy Oliveira (17:41):

That sounds amazing. I know that sometimes when you have it laid out, it seems like so smooth and streamlined. I know that change management on a campus can be an opportunity, but can have some challenges.

(17:57):

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(18:33):

I'm curious if you're willing to share how your team approach and is approaching, because it sounds like you're still in flight making this transition across your institution.

Allison Chase Padula (18:43):

Yeah, so we're really at the beginning of that process. By the time this airs, hopefully we'll already be over all those humps and we'll be into the summer and getting ready for their arrival in a month or so.

We're also, I, I think it's important for context, we also have a brand new, uh, general education program that's rolling out this year that was, uh, recently approved. So there's a lot of change all happening at the same time. And so I think we're trying to be really cognizant about how folks react to change, right? Some folks feel really comfortable with it and others it unsettles them. But at the core of all this is what's best for our students, right? And I think that's the reason why all of us in higher ed get out of bed every day. What are the things that are really gonna translate to helping our students?

(19:26):

And for us on our campus, we know that sense of belonging and relationships with people are what students again and again tell us has had the most meaningful impact. So I think we're trying to focus on, yes, there are some really big changes and it means we're gonna be approaching things differently, but at the core of that, it's making sure that students have what they need, right? And so making sure that students have that connection with an advisor early on, that they know it's somebody who is here and can refer them to the appropriate places, can help coach them in some different ways. And then having that strong connection with our faculty to say, okay, I've got a student who's maybe interested in this particular field and let me make that introduction so that you two can have a conversation about that. What it'll also help us do, I think, is to give our faculty more space.

(20:18):

Again, as I mentioned earlier, our faculty have all of the responsibilities that traditional faculty members have plus this advising load. And so it's a lot. And we have outstanding faculty advisors on our campus and those that do it really well are usually the ones who are telling me that, gosh, I wish I had more time to have more conversations, um, with students. And I think by taking part of the group out of the determination of how many folks they have for advising, by moving first year advisors to be their primary person will give faculty that time and space to really spend more time on the students who are in their departments. And so I think while some faculty may say, oh, but I, I'll miss working with the first year students, they're still gonna get to work with those first year students, right? But I think they'll get to know their students in a, in a deeper way. At least that's my hope.

Katy Oliveira (21:10):

Yeah. Yeah. It's really helpful because you're allowing the, in my experience, you're allowing the advisor to help with the what can be sometimes having just knowledge base across multiple disciplines of like the rules and the degree plans and the requirements and the gen ed, and especially if there's a change, um, this sounds very similar to my own experience, as well as just having that higher touch interaction with first year students who need a little bit more developmental support and then passing the torch to faculty, getting students transitioned, passing the torch to faculty to allow that mentoring, those mentoring pieces to move forward. And then they have a network of support rather than just one human being. They have a few different humans that can help them with different things and work together and help the student navigate the experience. It's lovely.

Allison Chase Padula (22:01):

We're looking forward to that. I mean, the other thing that has been part of this discussion that I think is also important to mention is, you know, the increase of mental health concerns for our students, having this first year advising model, I think will give us more information about those students who maybe are really struggling with those issues. And often what I hear from my faculty colleagues is like, I'm not trained in this. I'm not really sure what to do with this. And the folks that'll be working with our first year students are trained in making the appropriate referrals. Many of them have backgrounds in counseling even though they might not be counselors, right? So to have our eye on another really significant issue for us, I think is gonna be really important. And you know, you just mentioned the requirements and all that, that is one of the challenges, right?

(22:50):

In first year advising is try to get a population of students to understand all these things that they have to know, right? And higher ed I think often does not make that as simple as we could for students, right? So there are lots of, but you have to know this and you have to get a grade for this and you have to, you know, there's a prerequisite for this and there's all this language that they need to suddenly be able to understand, even navigate that, that we're really seeing these first year advisors as folks who can kind of lay a, a really strong foundation for all of that so that by the time they are rising up to be that sophomore, they know what their requirements are generally right? They have an understanding. They've started on some of those things. And so when they're getting to their faculty member, again, they're focusing on more of the conversations around the discipline and, and preparing for the future and having the conversations around, I'd love to do some research, or I'd like to go study abroad, or I wanna have more opportunities for learning. The faculty are in the best places to say, this is where I think that you should gain that experience. So I'm excited for it.

Katy Oliveira (23:54):

Yeah, it's great. Yeah, I think so too. And I think with mental health, especially having people who are my people and people that can help monitor and see students how they progress through their experience over time is a really effective and helpful way to support them. So that being said, a big part of that work I know from our other partners is using data and technology to help support that level of proactive student success. That can be hard in, in an older model where I know from my own experience was heavily reliant on students raising their hand and showing up at our offices and signing up for an appointment. I know that many folks in an effort to help students more holistically navigate the student experience, especially if they're not on campus in the same ways that they once were, and as mental health and just life needs become more complex as students demographics are shifting and needs are changing, that being able to proactively support students at scale is tricky. And, and one way of doing that is using data and case management technology to support that work. So I'm curious if you'll talk a little bit about if that is playing a role, how that's playing a role in this transition and what that looks like for your team.

Allison Chase Padula (25:17):

Yeah, so absolutely. Data is such an important part of all of this. And I think for too long, many of us in higher ed have relied, uh, too much on anecdotal information or our gut feeling, right? I know I'm often one of those folks who say, yep, I can tell you that this is the issue that's happening right now. And my colleagues will look at me and say, okay, but where are you getting that? And I'll say, oh, well it's because I talk to students all the time. I know those things, right? But we're not, I don't always have the data at my fingertips. So in the last several years, more data informed decisions and how we get to those decisions have played a much greater role in our planning from the place of how do we identify those students that we know need more attention because they're not raising their hand and they're not showing up, right?

(26:04):

Those are the ones who don't come in as well as, you know, how do we plan? So how do we plan what our enrollment numbers are looking like for the next year? Are we seeing a dip in a particular area? And so what I love about the Civitas Learning tools is that I have a place where I can check in on those things in a way that's really accessible. And so we've been trying to get more folks on our campus comfortable with the tools so that they're using it every day. I know that one of the ways I, I use it regularly is when we do our case management for our students of concern, I'm looking at those students that are coming through on that list that we know need a support because of something particular happening with them. I'm looking in Civitas to say, okay, are there other things I can see for that student right now?

(26:52):

Yes, they're coming up, you know, something's dipped for them. But I'm also using that to not wait till the point where a student shows up on that student of concern. So I'm using Civitas to look at, okay, I've seen these are the students that I'm seeing, you know, some sort of change in that they're at risk and that we need to be doing some more proactive work and not waiting until, you know, that bigger issue is coming up. I'm particularly excited about using this for our advising. I think one of the concerns I've always heard from faculty is that it's hard for them to communicate with their students. And now we're gonna be rolling out the advising tool for our, uh, faculty advisors and our folks in the advising office so that they can easily run that list of their students and see in a snapshot, you know, when I've showed some of my faculty colleagues, this is what you're going to have access to, their eyes light up because they're going to have that easy access to send that email to the student.

(27:50):

But they're also seeing those really important things that they need to know when that student's coming in for their appointment, right? Maybe they didn't successfully pass a class. Their GPA is maybe teetering on that edge of, of being an issue. They've never had access to that kind of information before, without having to go to several different places for it. And we know that when we, it's hard for people to access that information. They don't go through all those steps. So I'm really excited to have the advisors have that tool and to get our, particularly our leadership in the schools, our deans and associate deans to be accessing that information on a regular so that when people ask us how we're making that decision or why did you choose to focus in on this particular area, we have those numbers and the data to back that up for us. So it's certainly something that I think every institution struggles with, and particularly for us, it's been a huge, um, focus is that we need to be relying more on the data and sharing that data with others on campus so folks can be more effective.

Katy Oliveira (28:58):

Yes, it's so they can be more effective because of the data. But I think too, like you were saying, being able to pull lists of students, being able to see the student in one place, being able to communicate with the student easily takes down barriers to being able to more meaningfully engage with students. If you are a faculty member running from class to class and you have a list of students you need to reach out to and it's hard to see what's happening for them, it's hard to communicate with them in a way that the student will respond to. It can make it really cumbersome to have meaningful engagement with students in a way that's timely before they're on fire and they end up on that student of concern list, right?

Allison Chase Padula (29:38):

Yeah. And it goes back to, you know, having that shared responsibility for student success across campus. People need to have the tools to be able to do that, right? And when we make it really easy for them to see those things in a timely manner, to make it easier to communicate, I think more folks are, are automatically on board cause they're like, wow, you've just made this so much easier for me. Right? So I think our faculty having access to this for the first time is gonna be really a huge tool in their tool belt to make them more effective and to give the students what they need earlier. Um, and I think that's, we've shown that that's such a key for us when we're able to do the early outreach to folks that makes all the difference in the world. We can't be waiting and, you know, saying, oh, we wish we had known that at the end of the semester. Well, we knew it, you know, 8, 6, 8 weeks in. So having faculty have access to that information for them to have those conversations, I think is gonna be quite powerful.

Katy Oliveira (30:36):

Yeah. The power of student success analytics isn't that it's told you what's gonna happen. It's that it gives you an opportunity to have a different outcome for the student, right? If the student, if something flags that the student's unlikely to persist or that there's been a shift in the student's, um, engagement in their

courses, it gives you an opportunity to intervene while you still have time, while they still have time to make a difference, rather than the old way, the way, you know, where you get a list at the end of the semester and then you're trying to repair 'em the next semester when a student is potentially on probation and they're digging themselves out of a hole. It's, it's a really great way to get students help before they get in that hole. Well, we've covered a lot of ground. I wanna give you an opportunity to share anything else that you'd like to share that we've missed over the course of our conversation.

Allison Chase Padula (31:32):

One of the things I've been giving a lot of thought to is how do we make those decisions institutionally that prepare us to be ready for our students? And if you haven't read Tia Brown McNair's work, I'm a big fan of, you know, the student ready institution. And so we're utilizing all of these tools together so that we can prepare, right? And so we're not just being so reactive to things. And so when you put together the enrollment cliff and the mental health issues and the impact of covid and the learning gaps that students are coming to a with us, we need to be prepared for all of that. And to your point of not waiting until it's too late and the students have had a really terrible semester, and then they're questioning whether or not they should even be at school, right? And I'm a firm believer that higher ed shouldn't be a privilege.

(32:24):

It should be something that everybody can access. And so we can't put it on the students. You know, sometimes folks will say, well, if we had better students, then well no, let's turn it around and figure out how can we be better for our students, right? So that we can get them to where they need to be. And it doesn't mean that we just say, well, you know, we're gonna take down the, the rigor or we're gonna slow things down. It's, we need to figure out where they're at, and then we need to push them, right? We need to push them over that, over that hump, over that wall that's been there. And I think having the focus on the data and then having the tools to be able to do this puts us in a position to make some real, um, significant changes that make us ready so that we're not only reacting to things and looking at things that may have worked 20 years ago that no longer work today.

(33:18):

Um, and I think our students deserve us to be more strategic in our thinking, to be using that data and to really think about are the policies and the procedures and the way that we do things on our campus really what they need? They shouldn't be based on what feels comfortable to us, right? It should feel comfortable for the students. So I think most of our work in student success and retention right now needs to focus on how do we become better for our students? And, um, I'm pretty excited about the work that we've got going on here.

Katy Oliveira (33:49):

I am too. I can't wait to check back in with you in, in an, a semester or two to see what it looks like and to see its impact on your students and to see how it, how it's all coming to life. I think it's, it's important work. And I think that idea that, you know, we can't just keep rolling out the same general practices that worked 20 years ago, that we have to understand what our students need at our particular institution. And quite frankly, like different institutions in different regions of the country, like you were saying, have different students with different needs. And so having that historical looking data that's based on national trends and treating every student with a broad brush, it doesn't necessarily work anymore. You have to understand who's coming to your campus and where they are. And like you said earlier in this conversation, who's coming to your campus and what they need and want has changed tremendously in the last three years, much less the last 20. Right. So it, it makes a lot of sense and I'm excited to follow along.

Allison Chase Padula (34:49):

It's a very exciting time to be in higher ed and particularly in, I think the, the area of student success. So I hope I have really great news to share for you a semester out <laugh>.
Katy Oliveira (34:59):

Me too. Me too. Well, thank you Alison, so much for coming on the show today. I really appreciate your time.
Allison Chase Padula (35:04):

Thanks for having me, Katy.
Katy Oliveira (35:09):

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