



A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS AND LEADERS

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

**Blackstone Academy Charter School's
Approach to College & Career**



APRIL 2021



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Introduction

Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, is a small school with 350 students total and 80 to 85 graduating seniors each year. This intimate environment allows for the supportive, family culture that emanates through every part of Blackstone's approach, including how they help students prepare and plan for life after graduation. Brittany Ortiz, a Blackstone alum, says it was "her Blackstone family" who helped her achieve her college and career goals. "It was great that they were there to help us."

Kyleen Carpenter, one of Blackstone's founders and now head of school, says that, ultimately, when it comes to planning for life after high school, "We're going to try to help [our students] understand how to be the best possible citizen you can be, and that caring for each other, loving each other, and contributing back to those who helped you and contributing back to society at large is what we need all of you to do." And most of all: "I want our students to know whatever path they choose, I support you and I applaud you."

Carolyn Sheehan, Blackstone's executive director and co-founder, wants students to have as many opportunities on that future path as possible. She wants the world to be open to them—that's their vision for college and career preparation. "This is


what school is about. It's not just about being a school, it's to transform people's lives and their families."

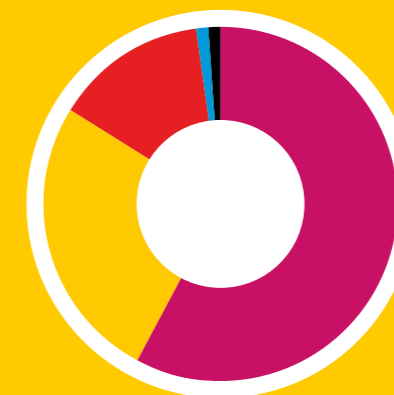
A focus on opportunities is also a way for Blackstone to help break systems of generational poverty and systemic racism. Many of Blackstone's students are immigrants or children of immigrants, with parents who have been working hard to give their children opportunities that were not available to them. "There are generational, systemic problems that a lot of our low-income BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) students face," says Kyleen. "So you know, our goal is to help one of our students, Jonathan, go to college and then get his master's from Notre Dame, but it's also breaking the generational poverty for immigrant Spanish-speaking families. Let's do that. But you have to start somewhere, and it starts with Jonathan getting into that program."








Listen to this

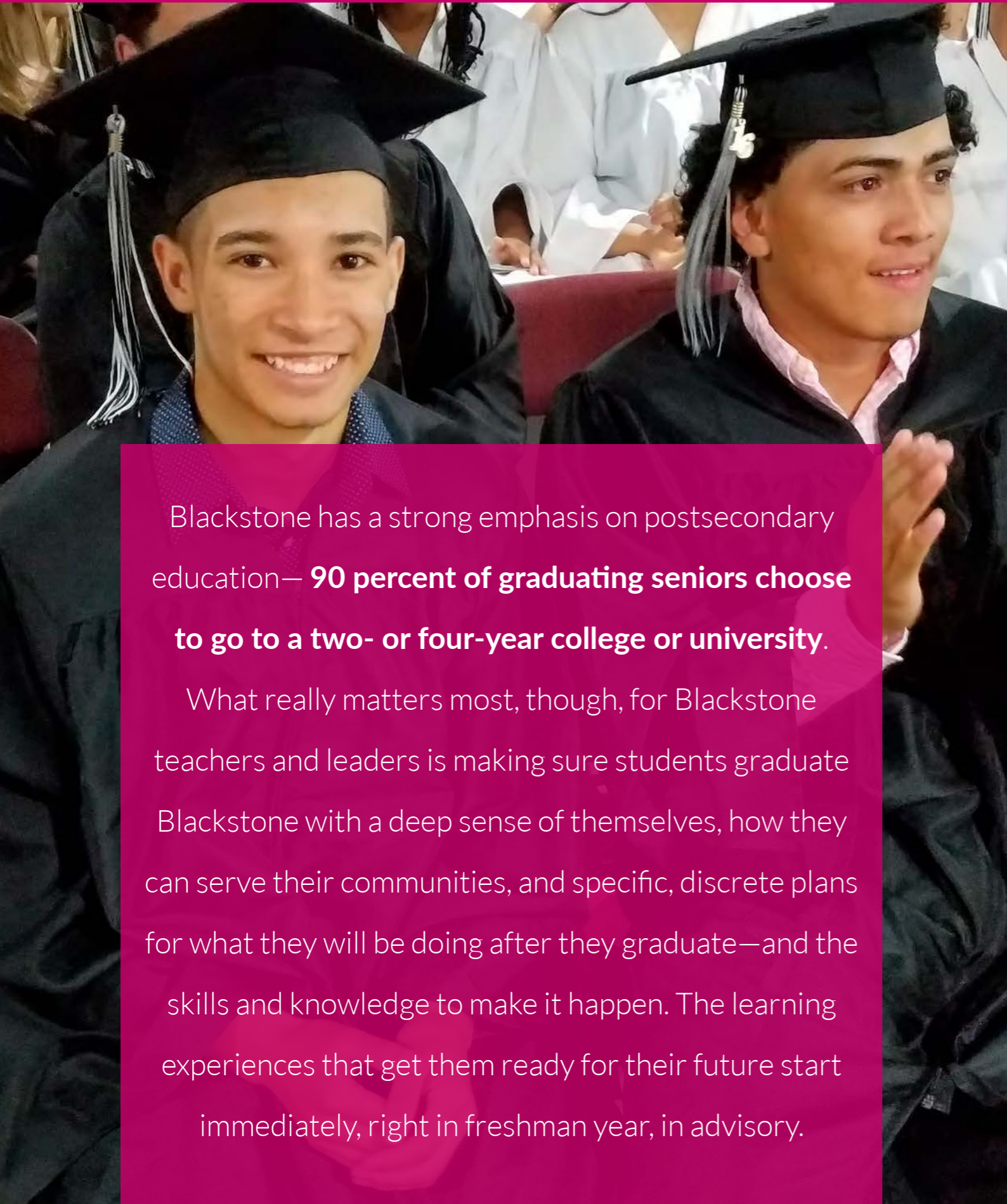
13-minute podcast that highlights how Blackstone approaches college and career planning and how it connects to the larger purpose of the school. Given its length, you might want to put on your headphones and take a walk or do something around the house as you listen! Movement is always a good pairing for audio storytelling.

BLACKSTONE DEMOGRAPHICS

9-12	Grades
350	Students
29	Teachers
14:1	Student-Teacher Ratio
81%	Free and Reduced Lunch
	Pawtucket, RI



	HISPANIC	58%
	BLACK	26%
	WHITE	14%
	ASIAN	1%
	TWO OR MORE RACES	1%
	AMERICAN INDIAN/ALASKAN NATIVE	0%
	HAWAIIAN NATIVE/PACIFIC ISLANDER	0%



Blackstone has a strong emphasis on postsecondary education— **90 percent of graduating seniors choose to go to a two- or four-year college or university.**

What really matters most, though, for Blackstone teachers and leaders is making sure students graduate Blackstone with a deep sense of themselves, how they can serve their communities, and specific, discrete plans for what they will be doing after they graduate—and the skills and knowledge to make it happen. The learning experiences that get them ready for their future start immediately, right in freshman year, in advisory.

Advisory

“Blackstone really puts relationships and the building of relationships as number one,” says Tasche Bryant, an English teacher and one of the teachers of Senior Seminar, a class described in the next section. “We really prioritize getting to know each kid individually and making sure that the decisions we make for them are the best for them.” Advisory is the heart of where this happens and it’s also where the majority of college and career planning occurs.

Starting as freshmen, Blackstone students join an advisory of 10 to 12 other students and a Blackstone staff member. This group stays together all four years. Advisory meets twice a day, during morning meeting and in the afternoon. They often take trips outside school together. Advisors are in close contact with each student and their families. “Sometimes I’m texting parents a few times a week,” says Stacy Joslin, an advisor, dean of 10th grade and one of the founders of Blackstone.

As freshmen and sophomores, the work in advisory centers on getting to know oneself. The classes use an online tool called [Xello](#), which is a subscription-based college and career-ready platform that has personality assessments, quizzes, career tools, and more, all of which help students begin to reflect on their strengths and interests.

The identity work then moves from an inner focus to an outer focus. During sophomore year, students begin work in advisory on the graduation portfolio requirement of job shadowing and volunteering in the world beyond Blackstone. Students are tasked with assessing their own external learning skills, such as self-awareness and communication, as they email organizations and businesses to plan their volunteering and job shadowing opportunities.

XELLO - COLLEGE & CAREER PLANNING PLATFORM

XELLO IS THE PLATFORM BLACKSTONE USES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS THROUGH THEIR JOURNEY OF PLANNING FOR LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL. HERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF WHAT THE STUDENT PROFILE LOOKS LIKE AND SOME OF THE TASKS.

The screenshot displays the Xello platform interface for a 9th Grade student named Sandra Smith. The interface is organized into several sections:

- 9th Grade**: The main heading for the current grade level.
- LESSON**: A list of tasks with checkboxes for completion and estimated durations.
 - Personality Styles**: 30 to 40 minutes. Tasks include "Complete the Personality Styles Quiz" and "Save 3 careers".
 - Exploring Career Factors**: 30 to 40 minutes. Task is "Save 3 careers".
 - Getting Experience**: 20 to 30 minutes. Tasks include "Save 3 careers", "Add 3 experiences to the Experiences Timeline", and "Students can give right it".
 - Study Skills and Habits**: 30 to 40 minutes. Task is "Students can give right it".
- STUDENT'S WALL**: A section for additional resources or updates.
- CAREER MATCHES**: A grid of job listings with details like "Hotel Desk Clerk", "Tax Preparer", and "Foreign Language Instructor", including salary ranges and match scores.
- PERSONALITY STYLE**: A section for personality assessment results.
- LEARNING STYLE**: A section for learning style assessment results.
- AFTER HIGH SCHOOL...**: A section for setting goals, with the example goal "My goal: More School or Training".

During junior year in advisory, students work on a service-learning project where they can team up with other students to investigate and solve an issue within the school community or outside the school walls. You can read extensively about the junior project on page 25 of the [model overview](#) of Blackstone. By senior year, students are working on their independent senior project. Student Shaunice Afriyie, who plans to study education in college, is doing her senior project on why there is such a lack of educators of color and how that pipeline can be changed. "Because all my life, in my 12 years of classes, I've only had two teachers of color.... So that's my main motivation for that. I'm really excited to push more and explore more about that topic." To learn more about how Blackstone approaches senior projects, check out [page 26](#) of the model overview.

Because of the deep relationships that are built in advisory through all this work they do together, advisors write recommendation

letters for each of their students. These are not your typical recommendation letters. Rather, the advisors invest significant time in crafting letters for each student with a deep focus on the unique character and strengths of each learner. After knowing a student for four years, these references are substantial, as opposed to other schools where a guidance counselor might be asked to write this letter for hundreds of students with only a few touch points with the individual.

Trish Almquist is Blackstone's guidance counselor. She took the job after she retired from her 35-year career at a large public high school in East Providence, solely because she was so excited about the work and Blackstone's approach. "The fact that the advisor ends up writing your college recommendation is so very different from what I was used to," says Trish. "It's just an amazing system, because think of how well they know that student...they can tell the stories that the colleges want to hear."

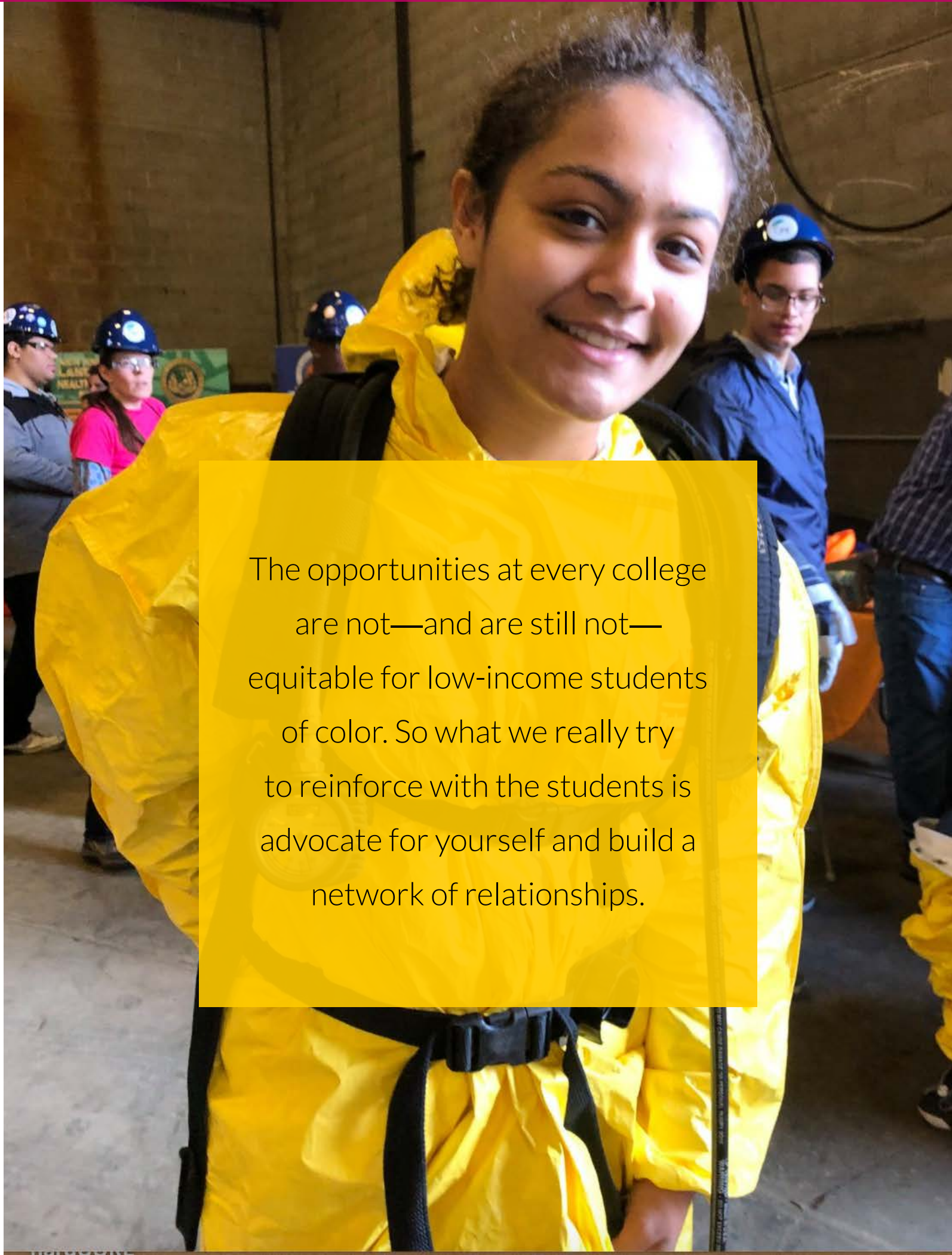
Senior Seminar

In addition to advisory, senior students take a class called Senior Seminar. It meets four times a week, and one of the main focuses of the course is on preparing for life after high school—whether that's college, work, an apprenticeship, programs like Job Corps and Year-Up, trade school, the military, or another path—and creating specific postsecondary plans to help them meet their goals.

During Senior Seminar, students receive assignments each week to support them to reach toward their goals. Here's a selection of assignments that demonstrate the arc of the curriculum month-by-month:

September

- Students work on researching colleges and creating their college lists with a balance of schools based on this criteria:
 - Just Right - your profile fits in the average range for the most recent accepted class.
 - Safety School - your profile is above the school's range for the average first year student. You should be pretty confident in your chances of admission.
 - Reach - it might be a long shot, but it could be possible!



The opportunities at every college are not—and are still not—equitable for low-income students of color. So what we really try to reinforce with the students is advocate for yourself and build a network of relationships.

- To help them build their list, the class runs through things to consider like majors, career goals, diversity, religious affiliation, public vs. private, and more. Together, they discuss tuition, ways Blackstone will help expose them to colleges, and how to do it on their own through research.
- Students are introduced to their "college closer," a staff member paired with each learner to help guide them through their postsecondary planning process. For students who are planning on a trade school, heading right to work, or taking another path, college closers focus on working with the individual student and their advisor to make sure a specific plan is in place. We will explain the college closer role in more detail later in the story.

October

- Students work on their résumés, brag sheets (showing who they are as a person in a way grades can't), and deciding who they want to

ask to write their recommendation, besides their advisor. Students are required to write an "ask letter" asking the person to write their recommendation and explaining why they think they are the right person to write it.

November

- The main focus of this month is completing the Common Application, having their short list of colleges completed, and prepping for Senior Day.

December

- Senior Day is held in early December every year. Senior Day is a rite of passage at Blackstone, in which the whole school shuts down for a day and the only people who come in are seniors, and the staff is there to help the students apply to college or other programs.

Senior Seminar teacher Tasche says Senior Day is one of her favorite days of the year: "It's really fun. Not everyone ends up applying on that day, but we go through the whole process. We make sure everyone has plans for the next year. And these kids have so many obstacles in the way of even just getting to an application. So it's really gratifying to see them press submit and to go through that process."

After Senior Day, Senior Seminar focuses on the next steps in the application process: What do you do when you receive a college acceptance or rejection? How do you read financial aid packages? What do you need to submit the FAFSA? How do you put down a deposit on a school?

As postsecondary plans near completion and applications are submitted, the focus of Senior Seminar centers on helping students complete their senior project, a comprehensive requirement for graduation. The senior project asks students to research a problem in their community they would like to solve and propose a solution. Students reach out to local organizations and community members to investigate their problem, find mentors connected to the work they are interested in, complete academic research to understand their problem in depth, and create a proposal for how to solve the problem and implement a solution. To learn more about the Senior Project, see [page 26](#) of the model overview.



SENIOR DAY TASK LIST

THESE ARE THE TASK LISTS THAT STUDENTS ARE EXPECTED TO GET DONE BEFORE SENIOR DAY AND DURING.

Complete the list Thursday before Senior Day!

- o Complete virtual tour for all colleges you are applying to
- o FSA ID Personal Plan
- o Add all schools to common app
- o Finalize College Essay - staff available to support
- o Final Draft of all supplemental essays
- o TD Essay
- o Respond to individual college question
- o Invite recommenders to all colleges through Xello

Task List for Senior Day!

- o Reviewing college list with College Closer
- o Ask folder and discussion with advisor (Letter, brag sheet, résumés)
- o Teacher Recommender(s) and Advisor Added on Common App
- o Common App Activities Section Review
- o Supplemental Essay Review
- o College Essay Review
- o Common App Final Review
- o Non-Common App Review
- o SATs Sent (if applicable)
- o FAFSA Submitted
- o Review the Day (SS Teacher)

Career Preparation

Students at Blackstone are supported to contemplate and plan for a career through a unique combination of learning opportunities and designated staffing. Blackstone has a career coordinator, Rhonda Hanaway, whose job responsibility is helping students navigate these choices. “Her job is specifically assisting the advisors with external learning tools and resources and then the advisors work with the students one-on-one while Rhonda works with them as a group. As students decide to do individual job shadows/internships etc. she works to coach them individually to be ready,” explains Carolyn.

“A lot of high schools just focus on that four-year graduation plan, but I really feel that Blackstone focuses on life and getting that person ready for anything that comes their way,” says Rhonda. Blackstone helps students contemplate their career goals and then figure out what pathway they want to take to get there, whether that’s college, a specific trade program, or a job in the community. Career exploration begins in ninth grade and continues through senior year. Here is a description of the learning sequence that builds each year.

9th grade: Self-Exploration & Volunteering

- Rhonda meets with 9th graders and their advisors to get students acquainted with the online tool, Xello, a college and career platform that will be used through all four years at Blackstone. Xello has a series of self-assessments and personality tests that students will complete as a first step in considering what careers might be a good fit for their strengths and interests.
- Freshmen are also encouraged to do several hours of volunteering in the community throughout the year, and advisors often plan group volunteer opportunities as well to make sure students have exposure to the world outside of Blackstone. Before the pandemic,

they offered after-school programs where students could volunteer as well.

- Rhonda and students’ advisors help them find volunteer opportunities that align with their interests. Students document their experience in their portfolio and, depending on the organization where they volunteered, students might get a written evaluation. At a minimum, students are expected to write a self-evaluation with written reflections contemplating what the volunteer experience was like, what they learned, and how it might serve them in the future.

10th grade: Continuing to Get Out Into the World - Job Shadowing & Volunteering

- The next stage of career exploration is job shadowing. Rhonda and each student’s advisors help set them up with their job shadows. These job shadows let students spend even more time in careers and vocations that interest them. Stacy Joslin, a 10th grade dean, had a Spanish-speaking student in her advisory who was really interested in dentistry. They found a dentist in nearby Providence who had a large number of Spanish-speaking patients, but didn’t speak Spanish herself. The student worked with the dentist for a year, translating and learning the profession.
- During 10th grade, a minimum of 20 hours is expected in volunteering or other similar external learning experience.

11th grade: Internships and Service-Learning Projects

- By 11th grade most students have an idea of what sector or topic they are interested

in exploring further when it comes to community engagement and careers. Now the focus turns to internships and a service-learning project.

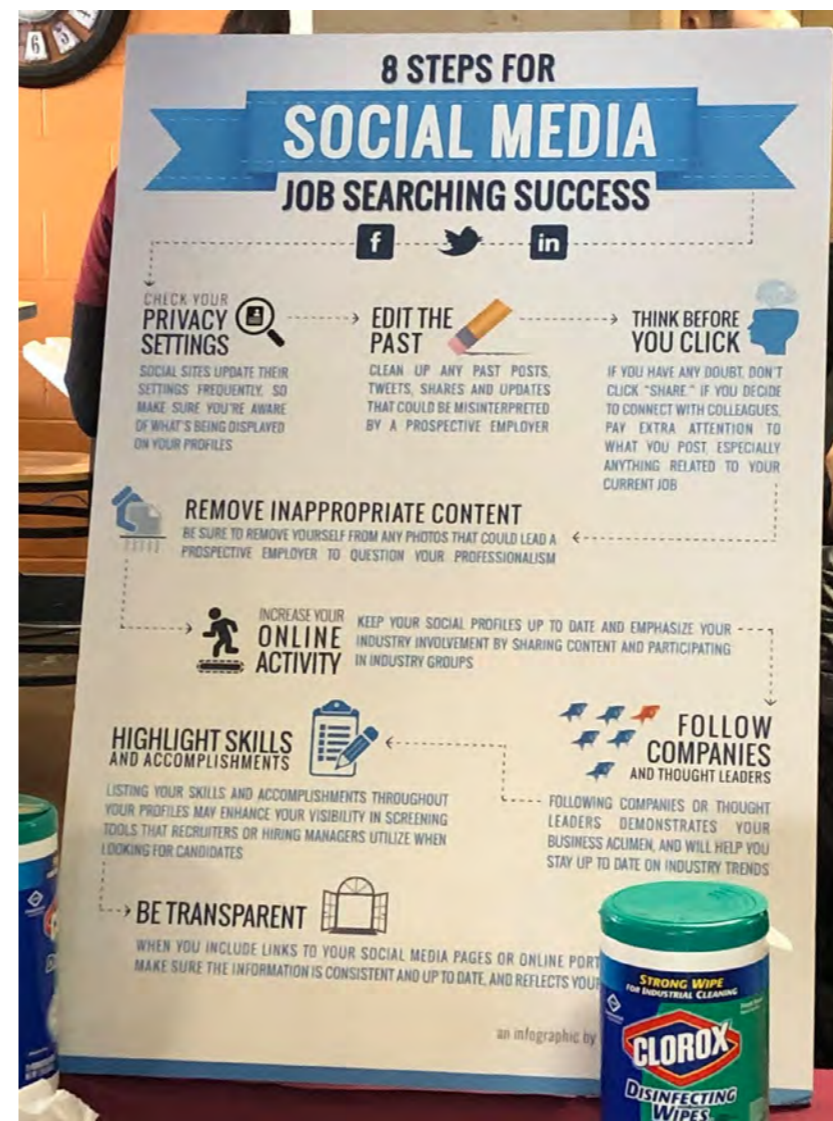
- When it comes to finding an internship, Rhonda helps students find the right organization in their area of interest.
- Service-learning topics can be anything from housing and homelessness, to poverty, to veterans. “It could be global warming, it could be leukemia. There are so many different subjects. They can find those topics from their classes or from career resources,” says Rhonda. Blackstone really asks students to consider what their burning passion is and what they want to change most in their communities.
- Rhonda tells the story of one student who

got a donation from a local bank, gathered a group of volunteers from the school and community, and fixed a park that was unused. The swing sets were broken, paint was peeling, there was trash and debris. “They cleaned it up and now it’s a working park. So that is something that the community can use now.” [Read more](#) about junior year service-learning projects on page 25.

- During 11th grade, students also learn more about professionalism and practice interviewing, an important skill when it comes to landing a job. During advisory, Rhonda holds lessons on professionalism. “We prepare them with interview questions, how to dress, how to act, put your phone away, smile, shake hands, thank them, send a thank you card, all those things,” she says. The school hosts an “interview fair” where students participate in mock interviews. “We bring in professionals from all over,” says teacher Stacy Joslin. “We do mock interviews for a whole day and there are contests and prizes. That unit prepares them for how to be successful in an interview. They go through three or four rounds that day. So they get practice all day long on doing interviews. I think that’s huge to graduate high school with a really solid résumé and knowing how to do an interview.”

12th grade: Senior Project

- Senior project builds on everything from the past three years with a research paper and a year-long project where students help solve a problem in their community, propose and try out a solution, and then study its effectiveness and present it to a panel of teachers and staff. You can dig deeper into senior projects on page 26 of our [first story](#) on Blackstone. For many students, the work they do during their senior projects is connected to the work they plan to pursue in their careers or to learn more about in college. ■





A College Culture

When it comes to what the plan is after high school, for most Blackstone students it's a two- or four-year college or university. Blackstone has a 95 percent graduation rate. Of those graduating seniors, 90 percent head to a postsecondary institution, with the majority of those attending a four-year college or university program (85%). Many students will be the first in their family to attend college and it's a significant achievement. Alum Brittany Ortiz says Blackstone wanted all their students to aim high and never doubt that they could go to college.

Before the founding of Blackstone, Kyleen and Carolyn worked together at the summer program [SPIRIT](#). While working with students in that program, they saw a pattern: many of their students would have liked to go to college, but decided not to go because they weren't sure how to apply, got discouraged taking SATs, couldn't piece together the funding, and felt overwhelmed by the FAFSA.

"We are serving a community that has not been served well in terms of college-going culture,"

says Carolyn. "There was a tradition of not enough kids getting access that should have, so we felt like we had to be strong.... It really does come down to one of the reasons why we started this school, we just saw barriers to opportunity with students."

Kyleen says part of their emphasis on college at Blackstone is also aimed to dismantle the higher education system of the U.S. that has historically underserved communities of color. (Take a look at this [resource](#) that Blackstone staff have been reading together for professional development on White supremacy culture and the ways it informs all systems, including higher education.) According to the [National Center for Education Statistics \(NCES\)](#), Black and Hispanic 18-24-year-olds attended college at lower rates than White students (37 and 36 percent compared to 42 percent); numbers like that don't provide the stories behind the systemic racism that exists and still makes higher education a more challenging goal for some. Blackstone is working to change that with their students.

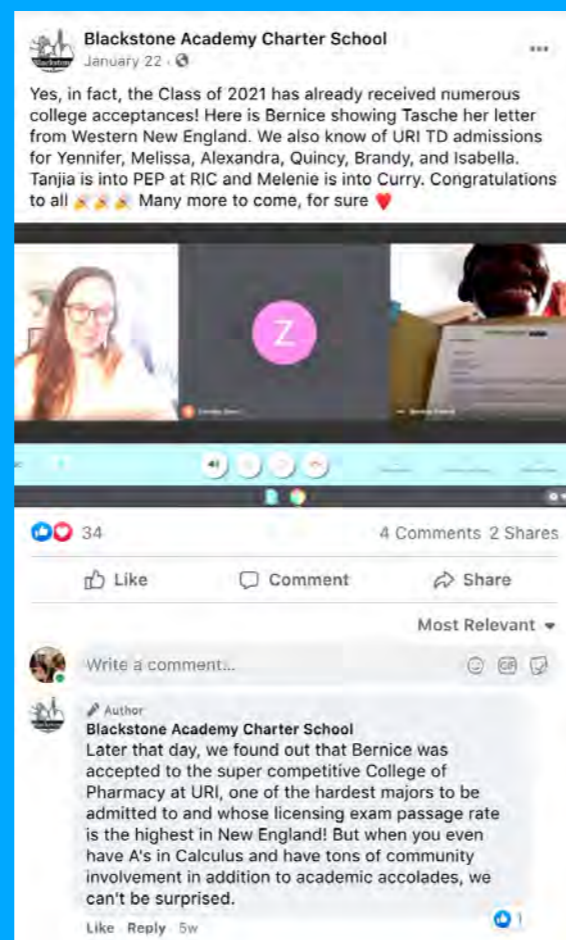
Celebrating College

Since a focus on postsecondary education is one of the core values of Blackstone, celebrating college and college plans is an energetic pulse that runs through the school's atmosphere. The hallway walls are covered with students' college acceptance letters. Morning meetings, which happen daily, are filled with celebrations of what students plan to do after graduation.

Brittany reflects on the impact that had on her. "During those morning meetings, one thing that I would always remember is they would acknowledge college acceptances. So as a sophomore or a freshman or junior you're hearing all of these seniors get accepted to this,

getting accepted to that. And in the hallway, they would post your application so it was highlighting your success... And so as a 10th grader, I would see that. And I'm like, 'Wow..that's so cool!'"

Not only cool, Brittany said it was incredibly motivating. She also wanted to be on that wall, to go to college, and so she did. She attended college, then got her master's degree, and now works as the program administrator/multi-site director of after-school programs for the YMCA in Boston. (Brittany's interest in after-school programs began at Blackstone during her service learning experiences. You can hear her talk more about that in our [first podcast](#).)



BLACKSTONE CELEBRATES STUDENTS' COLLEGE ACHIEVEMENTS REGULARLY ON THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS!

You might think the emphasis on where students have been accepted would breed competition or ill-will, but student Shaunice says not at all. Morning meetings are run by students, she explains, and it's usually students recognizing and congratulating other students. "We can congratulate each other without feeling some type of superiority complex. I can easily congratulate my peer." The culture at Blackstone "encourages us to use our voices and speak about whatever we need to...and all [voices] are accepted," she says, and that carries into discussing post-high school plans.

What also helps is the way teachers talk to students, making them feel loved and like anything is possible, says Shaunice. "Most of my teachers would say [at the start of class] something like, 'Hi, my little leaders. Hi, my entrepreneurs. Hi, my social disruptors'.... I don't know other schools...who have that type of positive reinforcement for their students."

College Visits

One important way Blackstone helps students achieve college dreams is through exposure. The school plans, pays for, and takes students on 20 college visits a year. Senior Dean Diego White, 12th grade dean, who is also in charge of college access at Blackstone, plans and oversees this robust schedule of college visits. Two Saturdays a month (pre-COVID-19), he and other staff members take students to visit colleges all around the state and New England. It's not a standard tour, though; if there are any alumni of Blackstone, he has them give them the tour, and if not, he connects with student groups on campus.

"Typically when we're on a college campus, I'm not going through admissions. I try to go through alumni a lot. I try to go through some of the different student groups or maybe the multicultural center, to get somebody that looks like our students, which is always a big piece." In terms of the tours themselves, Diego tries to be creative. "It's not a cookie cutter college visit." Students will eat in the dining hall, of course, and see the campus. They also like to sit in on professors' courses and see a basketball or football game. They spend time in the multicultural centers, see the technology offerings, and get a real look at the experience of students.

For many of Blackstone's students, going to college will be the first time they are racially in the minority in an educational setting, says Diego. Shaunice tells a story about a recent trip to the University of Michigan where she felt this. As a rising junior, she was accepted with a cohort of other Black students to spend the summer at the university as part of the [Telluride Association Sophomore Seminar program](#). "I didn't realize how White Ann Arbor was until I got there." Shaunice explains the subtle racism she felt on campus and in the community.

"I got into a program between my sophomore and junior years that took place in the University of Michigan. And I spent six weeks there. Well, what they don't tell you is how Ann Arbor is a predominantly White town, and it's not like that's bad, it's just that it was a program for students of color. So it's a small town or city, whatever it is. And there's 28 of us students of color learning about Black history and its impact and its legacy that we're still living today, walking around these expensive cafes, expensive restaurants, and you start feeling a feeling of unwelcomeness. There were several instances of race, like racial remarks from the actual residents of Ann Arbor and the employers. And we didn't even know how to feel cause this wasn't our town and even our state. And I know it's inevitable, but at least experiencing that summer program, I know what imposter syndrome is. I know how it feels to be unwelcomed in an environment where...we're all trying to strive for the same thing. And that type of discrimination and just overall impoliteness, I don't know how to explain it in words, but it's a lesson I will always carry."

Her experience at the summer program was eye-opening to Shaunice, but talking about race is nothing new, thanks to the open and frank discussions she's had at Blackstone. "Race isn't an uncomfortable conversation with us, like at all," Shaunice says. "Even though most of our administrators and teachers are White. They have never made us feel like we're put on display to talk about our feelings racially, you know, like, 'Hey kids of color, how do you feel about being kids of color?' And I don't think I would have had these conversations outside of Blackstone. So race is definitely not a taboo subject to us. And just being a Black woman, race is always, I mean, it's always just going to be part of your

experience, but it's nice to go to a school where they're directly addressing it." Shaunice's experience helped her reflect on what kind of atmosphere and environment she wants at the college or university she ends up choosing to attend.

The emphasis on college tours and helping students apply to programs before senior year, like Shaunice did, all comes back to Blackstone's value of exposing students to as many opportunities as possible.

EQUITY IN COLLEGE & CAREER

The National Equity Project defines educational equity as "each child receiving what he or she needs to develop to his or her full academic and social potential." At Blackstone, an equitable education is foundational to how the school operates and approaches college and career planning. "I think the fact that we don't just have a guidance counselor doing all the work around college and career readiness is a very helpful strategy when you're trying to ensure equity because it means there are a lot of people who know the student from different angles and who are going to be working with the students throughout their four years," says Carolyn. Students are supported by their advisors, a career counselor, a guidance counselor, and a specific college closer. Carolyn adds, "I also think that part of our effort in trying to unify the advisory curriculum across all the years is to ensure that everyone has equal access."

Blackstone's equity work also extends to helping students make plans for what happens once they reach that college campus or job, says Kyleen. "The opportunities at every college are not - and are still not - equitable for low-income students of color. So what we really try to reinforce with the students is advocate for yourself and build a network of relationships. For example, access office hours with your professors. Make sure you go to the writing center to get help with your papers. I always tell my kids to find ways to connect personally with people who can help you, like your financial aid advisor. For example, bring a coffee to your financial aid advisor. That small gesture helps foster a personal connection and depth of relationship. Getting to know each other, and especially having those in key roles at the college know the student is so important. It may mean that the financial aid advisor goes the extra step to help the student access opportunities and stay up to date on their loan stuff. I advise my kids to join the affinity groups. Since we are a majority BIPOC student body, the need for affinity groups doesn't typically arise at Blackstone. We also work in targeted ways to help our students learn the benefits of getting to know people who are from different backgrounds so that tolerance is built and barriers are broken down...so for me, an important part of ensuring equity is letting them know, 'Hey, you're headed to an all-white, rich kid institution and here are some things you need to know in order to make sure you're having an equitable experience.'"

COLLEGE TOUR QUICK FACTS & RESOURCES

COST

Blackstone's budget prioritizes these college tours. Blackstone receives some private funding and donations that helps with these tours (and also helps pay for students who attend Blackstone's summer program SPIRIT to attend these tours as well). Blackstone also has their own school vans, and the teachers or administrators drive the vans, which saves money. Oftentimes universities/colleges will offer free lunch for visits. If not, Blackstone will have students bring a bagged lunch. Importantly, Carolyn emphasizes, college tours are not viewed as something "extra" that needed to be added into the budget—it was always an essential part of the mission. "We knew we couldn't fulfill our mission without having some vans to go into the community and to travel to colleges, so this had to be part of our budget. And, we had to figure out insurance. So these were not extra—they were a necessity in the budget. Once you make that initial capital investment, the gas and maintenance isn't crazy," Carolyn continues: "There are things that we don't have at Blackstone, like fancy science labs, a real gym, and our own library—we use the city resources." On average, the cost for each visit comes out to about \$400-500 and if they do 20 a year it's about \$10,000/per year.

STAFFING

Part of Diego's job is to run these college tours, so he is paid for his time on Saturdays through his salary, and he has a flexible schedule during the week. For any other teachers that come to chaperone, Blackstone pays an hourly rate. "It's an easy, fun way for staff to make a little more money," says Carolyn. If the visit is local, the trip is three hours long. If they are going out of state, it's a six-hour day. "We have a cadre of professionals, both teachers and non-teachers, who have been willing to do the trips on Saturdays or school vacation weeks for a reasonable stipend of \$60/person," says Carolyn. "The trips are not a heavy lift for the professionals as they are really just helping the students process and interpret what they see on a tour."

COMMUNICATING WITH SCHOOLS

Diego is the point person who talks to all the colleges and universities. He has a long list of contacts, and he emails and calls admission officers and alumni to schedule the visits. This work is part of what he is doing during the day as the college access administrator.

WHO ATTENDS THE TOURS

The tours are open for any Blackstone student, freshman through senior. Ideally Blackstone wants the underclassmen on the tours, since by senior year students should have a good sense of where they are applying. About 15-20 students attend the tours on average and they are only day trips, no overnights. Blackstone typically only visits schools they can drive to in Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut.

WHERE THEY GO

Here are the frequent fliers that are within driving distance to Blackstone and that they regularly visit:

University of Rhode Island	Wheaton College
Rhode Island College	Stonehill College
Community College of Rhode Island	UMass Dartmouth
Providence College	Bridgewater State College
Brown University	Northeastern University
Roger Williams College	Emmanuel College
Salve Regina University	Suffolk University
Johnson and Wales University	
Bryant University	
New England Institute of Technology	
Assumption College	
College of the Holy Cross	
Clark University	
Worcester Poly Tech	
Boston College	
Boston University	

Helping Families with Federal Student Aid & College Admin Tasks

Helping families with the administrative side of applying to college is another big part of Blackstone's approach. "The college process is supposed to be nerve-wracking and fun and crazy and full of hope, but it's also a big burden if it's the very first time that you or your family has gone through it," says Kyleen. Understanding that and working to eliminate barriers and relieve those burdens is how Blackstone staff see their role when it comes to postsecondary planning.

"My mom did not know how to help me apply to college," says alum Brittany. "She didn't know I needed to take SATs. These were all key things that Blackstone did for us, helped us navigate the whole college process and it helped me, my family, my cousins, and my classmates. They were there to literally hold our hand and guide us through every step."

Blackstone runs SAT classes for all upperclassmen, making sure everyone has access, not just families who can afford private tutors. College essays, résumés, scholarships, and applications are all done together in advisory, English class, and Senior Seminar. Blackstone staff also provide one-on-one meetings with families where they complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application together.

Parent Raina Sheffield explains the impact this made on her and her daughter Jae. "I didn't know about all of this stuff, you know, filling out the scholarships...my daughter had the self-knowledge and where she didn't have the knowledge, the teachers at the school did and helped out." Raina says the meetings where they sat down and went through the FAFSA together was enormously helpful. "It helped ease the anxiety. I really appreciated that."

When Carolyn was at SPIRIT, she remembers hearing from former students that they didn't attend college because they hadn't completed their FAFSA, and without financial aid, postsecondary education was just a pipe dream. That memory is the engine behind her passion for the administrative side of college admissions: no Blackstone student will be prevented by inaccessible, complex forms from going to college.

Diego has a similar memory, but it's his own. He remembers hustling every semester to make enough money on his off-campus jobs to piece together the payments for tuition. Helping students apply for scholarships and receive aid so they don't have to have that stress motivates him.

Diego, Carolyn, Kyleen, and Blackstone's guidance counselor Trish are the designated team for supporting families in the FAFSA process. They call themselves the "college closers," working with students to make sure all their ducks are in a row. They delight in the process: making sure college paperwork is perfectly in order and answering phone calls, texts, and emails at all times of the day helping students achieve their dreams. The college closers divide up all the seniors so every senior has the personalized support they need to complete their post-high school plans. The closers work carefully with their list of students to make sure students are strategic about where they are applying. (For example, if they want a specific major or career the closer will help make sure their college choices allow for it.) The closers also help students stay on track with all the administrative tasks - the supplemental essays, the grant applications, and so on.

Advisors are also regularly in touch with parents during the college process. The school hosts a junior planning meeting (all Blackstone events are held in both English and Spanish to accommodate their families) to give families insight into the post-high school planning process that students will engage in junior and senior year. Making sure students and families are supported as they tackle these postsecondary admin tasks is Blackstone's goal. ■



FINANCIAL AID SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES: QUICK FACTS & RESOURCES

STAFFING


Blackstone has a cohort of four administrators called the "college closers" who are responsible for helping families with completing the FAFSA and accessing other financial aid resources. This role is part of their job duties. The group includes: head of school, executive director, guidance counselor, and 12th grade dean/college access administrator.

FINANCIAL AID EDUCATION

The college closers come into advisory and Senior Seminar regularly to help prep students for the financial aid process. They teach a lesson on how students can access their FAFSA form PIN and how to obtain an electronic signature from their parents so that they are able to start working on the applications at school. The college closers also walk students through all the various parts of financial aid—federal, state, private, and public loans, and other grants/scholarships that are available. They help students who don't have a social security number navigate the best path forward. "We are going to teach families this, but most of all we want students to know this information because when they are away at college they are going to need to know how to reapply for financial aid each year," says Carolyn.

SCHEDULING

College closers, in partnership with each senior student, schedule time to meet together with families. They let parents know what information to bring (last year's taxes) and they block out time to meet. These meetings are usually in the evenings or on Sundays. "We meet for as long as it takes," says Carolyn. Typically it's about an hour for each family. Since there are four college closers, each admin works with about 20 families.



Blackstone has a **95 percent** graduation rate and of those graduating seniors, **90 percent** head to a postsecondary institution, with the majority of those attending a four-year college or university program (85%). **Many students will be the first in their family to attend college and it's a significant achievement.**

Taking Another Path

Over the years, Blackstone staff have come to realize that although they want college—and the conversation of education post-high school—to be available to each one of their students, many high school graduates today have non-linear paths that include a mix of work, education, job training, and travel and volunteer experiences. Some students head directly to work to support themselves and families. Other students would rather pursue a trade that doesn't require a college degree, start a business, join the military, or embark on a faith-based vocation.

Kyleen contemplates some past experiences with students. "I had a student who I worked with very closely because she was struggling with homelessness. And I was like, getting out of Rhode Island and going to a residential college is what you should be doing. And I probably pushed her too much toward that. And I think she did it because she didn't want to disappoint me and some others here. So she did it for a year and it didn't work. It was not good for her. So I learned I need to listen more." When another student says they are having a baby, Kyleen realizes that, rather than saying, "Wow you're having a baby that's just going to make things more difficult for yourself." I should say, "Great, that's great that you're having a baby. Is that making you happy? How can I support you?"

What Blackstone thinks is the best path for a student may not be the right one, remarks Kyleen. "I might think [my idea is] the best idea, but for that kid and that particular experience with their family I just need to shut up and pay more attention to how they feel when they talk about these things." It's also recognizing when a student is worried or nervous about a new experience or when a teenager truly wants something other than what the adults want. "I think I've learned to see the difference between

something a kid really doesn't want to do and something they're just nervous about doing because it's new...I've kind of learned better, in all these years, that line between, you know, enacting my will on kids' futures as opposed to listening more carefully to theirs."

In addition to listening carefully and being careful not to push students on a path that's not right for them, Blackstone is also turning toward other options for postsecondary educational opportunities or bridge programs. "We're not going to turn into a vocational specialist school," says Carolyn, but one of the things the school has been working on is how to better support students who are taking a path that doesn't include college. "We have one student this year... where we're paying for them to take a carpentry program as part of their senior year. It's the first course that they are required to take to become an apprentice, and so we're looking at how do we reorganize ourselves for kids like that. Maybe it's part of our budget and there's money for something like that which is very specific."

Most of all, Blackstone really wants students to have the options the student wants and that goes beyond the "college-for-all" mindset.



A Path Forward

When students walk off the graduation stage, what Blackstone wants them to leave with are some big dreams, a whole lot of hope, specific plans for getting where they want to go, and the skills and mindsets they need to do it.

Most of all, the legacy Blackstone left on alum Joaquin Ortiz is to believe in himself. "And, you know, to do your best." He carries that with

him as he raises four children with his wife, a fellow Blackstone alum, and together they meet big life goals, like being the first in their family to buy a house.

Blackstone students, like Joaquin, are certainly ready for their best, thanks, in part, to the careful preparation they do during their four years of high school. ■

CAREER, TECHNICAL & BRIDGE PROGRAMS: QUICK FACTS & RESOURCES

Career pathways are specialized and personalized to each particular student, their interests, and their needs. Here are some of the organizations and resources Blackstone has used to help students advance their career goals:

- **Prepare RI** - offers Rhode Island students paid summer internships at corporations and in government throughout the state.
- **RI Advanced Course Network (ACN)** - this program allows Blackstone students to take free college classes as well as participate in certification programs such as Certified Nursing Assistants and Legal Assistants programs.
- **MTTI Career program** - offers short-term certificate programs in a number of trades.
- **RI Construction Career Academy** - offers night classes for all the major apprenticeships programs associated with the construction trades. Blackstone is currently paying for one senior student's class and may do that for others in the future during their senior year.
- **Year Up** - paid student training and college classes resulting in placement in high-paying corporate and non-profit positions.
- **Job Corps** - a program that has been a great option for students who need or want to get away from their current environment and explore a variety of career fields. "Some of our students have had the "going away to college" feel (through [Job Corps](#)) and have completed certifications in many vocations," says Carolyn. "Many have stayed in Rhode Island, but some have gone to Maine, Vermont, and Massachusetts for a year or so and come back with a certification and funds to get an apartment and start community college or a job."
- **CareerDevs** - this is a fairly new program that one of Blackstone's current seniors may attend. They offer a cost effective pathway to high paying tech jobs. The students pay their tuition back in installments after they get permanent employment.



Blackstone is an inspiring place. Continue your exploration of the school through these resources.

[Visit Blackstone's website](#) to learn more about the school.

[Follow Blackstone's Facebook page](#), which is updated regularly.

[Explore Blackstone's YouTube channel](#) for recordings of school events, meetings, and conversations.

[Blackstone Academy Charter School: Model Overview](#), also published by NGLC.



BLACKSTONE ACADEMY
CHARTER SCHOOL:
PREPARING STUDENTS
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