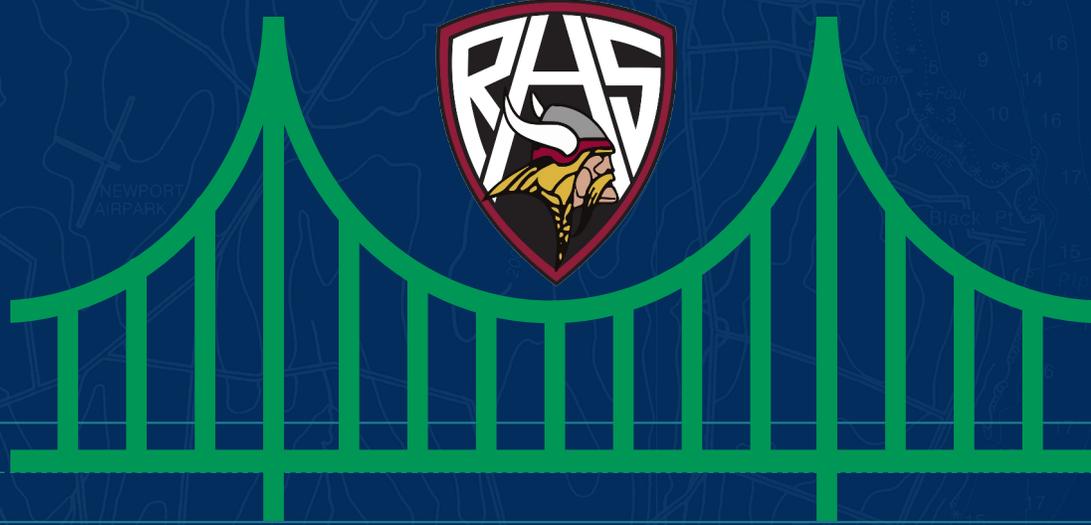


R H O D E I S L A N D
(A Q U I D N E C K I)

BY CATHERINE DOLAN '23



The Pathway to Possibility



COLLEGE BECOMES A
REALITY THROUGH SALVE'S
PATHWAYS PROGRAM.

On a wintery Tuesday afternoon, René Rodriguez '29 is already a step ahead.

His homework for the week is done. His math notes are organized, Italian vocabulary is reviewed and he has mapped out when he'll study, when he'll relax and when he can squeeze in a nap. As a first-year Salve student pursuing a challenging 3+2 dual-degree program in electrical engineering with Washington University in St. Louis – plus minors in Italian and data analytics –his schedule is full.



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René Rodriguez '29 and Aída Neary

But as he walks across Salve's oceanside campus toward Gerety Hall to help high school students rehearse their senior project presentations, Rodriguez doesn't feel overwhelmed. He feels prepared.

That instinct – to plan ahead, to juggle competing responsibilities, to see himself as someone who belongs in college, didn't happen by accident. It's the result of three years in Salve's Pathways Program, a college access partnership with Rogers High School and community organizations throughout Newport.

Rodriguez is now the first Pathways graduate to attend Salve. His presence in the classroom and on campus marks a powerful milestone for a program designed for students who, at one time, may not have seen college as part of their future.

"At first, even before joining the program, I didn't want to go to college," he said. "It was just a really far-away dream that I didn't think I could get. If I was thinking that way, imagine people who never got the opportunity to be in Pathways."

BUILDING A BRIDGE

The idea for Pathways didn't start with a curriculum or a grant. It started with listening.

In summer 2021, Aída Neary, director of community educational partnerships and the Pathways Program, and President Kelli J. Armstrong spent months meeting with organizations across Newport – from the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Community Center to local nonprofits and schools – asking a simple question: What do you think about Salve?

The response was overwhelmingly positive, with partners praising Salve students for their presence and impact throughout the city. Those conversations also illuminated an exciting opportunity; while Salve students were deeply engaged in Newport, many local high schoolers had not yet experienced Salve's campus firsthand.

Newport Public Schools is a Title I district, meaning a significant percentage of students come from low-income households. When Pathways began, Rogers High School had one of the lowest graduation rates in the state. The student body is deeply diverse, culturally, linguistically and racially, but not many were moving on to four-year colleges.

So Neary drafted a plan: a three-year program that would support students from 10th grade through graduation, offer steady college exposure, cultivate academic skills and prepare them for the application and financial aid process – all with consistency at its core.



Pathways students take a college tour at George Washington University (left) and visit the Capitol in Washington, D.C.

“We have young people who have the intelligence and just don’t have the opportunity,” said Neary. “We have a lot of privilege being at a university, and we should use it in positive ways.”

YEAR ONE: DISCOVERY AND EXPLORATION

Today, Pathways includes three full cohorts, totaling 36 students, where six languages are spoken.

“You cannot be what you cannot see,” said Neary. “In Newport, our students grow up seeing the hospitality industry, construction, real estate. None of those things are wrong, but it’s a very narrow casting. That’s what they think they can do, and they don’t see anything else.”

So, 10th-graders spend the academic year visiting departments on Salve’s campus and community partners around the city. One week they might be in the hydroponics lab with Dr. Jameson Chace learning about environmental science and botany. Another week, they’re at the Newport Historical Society, where students learn from executive director Rebecca Bertrand ’08.

College stops are also built into the program. Students explore campuses in Boston, Washington, D.C., or New York City, seeing 10 to 12 universities over three years – college

tour experiences that, typically, are more available to students with greater financial resources.

YEAR TWO: EXPERIENCE AND PREPARATION

Junior year raises the stakes. Each Pathways student joins a small group and spends the year working on a community action research project, identifying an issue in a community they belong to and proposing a solution. Along the way, they practice college-level research, writing, interviewing and presenting.

For Rodriguez, the project was deeply personal. As a native Spanish-speaker, he was able to explore why Spanish-speaking students at Rogers High School don’t wish to attend college or pursue higher education.

He talked with classmates from every grade level, as well as teachers at Rogers and professors at Salve, read articles from the Rhode Island Department of Education, and studied data about higher education rates among Hispanic students. His solution proposed a support group for students pursuing higher education, but the idea didn’t end there.

“The students from last year took my project and raised it to the next level,” said Rodriguez. “Now they have a program at Rogers called Latinos Growing Together. They’ve been

doing so awesome. I'm really proud they used my project to inspire their work."

YEAR THREE: APPLY AND EXCEL

By senior year of high school, Pathways becomes the place where college stops being abstract.

"In the fall, it's applying, applying and more applying," shared Neary. "We meet twice a week to get applications done, then every other week in the spring for financial aid."

There are summer readings, early brainstorming sessions on college essays and even a weeklong "orientation" between graduation and college, which is part of the Salve Compass program's Compass Summer, with current second- and third-year students serving as mentors.

For many students, including Rodriguez – who moved to Newport from El Salvador at age 11 and learned English in

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AÏDA NEARY

middle school during the pandemic – that day-to-day comfort on a college campus is transformational.

"Being on Salve's campus a lot makes them believe they can be on any campus," said Neary. "That is huge. When nobody in your family went to college, you don't think that is a place where you fit. After three years, they know Salve. They're comfortable being on a college campus around college students."

Pathways draws support from across the University: faculty who open their labs and classrooms, librarians who help select summer reading, admissions and financial aid staff who demystify applications and more. In addition, Neary welcomes two social work students each year who become deeply involved in the operations and structure of the program.

Rodriguez, who is now a Pathways mentor, valued that personal support.

"We had mentors who were similar in age, and we could talk to them," he said. "Talking to Aïda, we're not going to get the same answers about college life as from actual college students. I really enjoyed having that extra help and support from people who already know what college life is like. It helped to make it feel even more possible."

PARTNERS IN POSSIBILITY

Beyond campus, a network of Newport partners anchor the exploration year: the Newport Historical Society, Fort Adams State Park, the Newport Tree Conservancy, Newport Art Museum, City Hall, even Island Cemetery, where students once did a scavenger hunt among the historic headstones. Donors – including van Beuren Charitable Foundation, John Clarke Trust, Eastern Bank Foundation and Rhode Island Foundation – help cover costs that students never see, from snacks, meal plans and supplies to overnight college trips that can cost thousands of dollars.

Every Pathways student who completes the three-year program is offered admission to Salve. For some, the program serves as a launching pad to different colleges and universities, but for Rodriguez, the decision was clear.

"Salve has been my top choice since I joined Pathways," he said. "I always liked how the campus feels like home. I knew I would not be overwhelmed by myself because I not only have the support of my parents and family, but I have Miss Aïda, and I know she will always support me and have my back."

FOR MORE INFORMATION

visit salve.edu/pathways. To support the Pathways Program, visit salve.edu/give-pathways or contact maelynn.patten@salve.edu; 401-341-2143.