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Educated work force is needed, says jobs expert

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Julian Alssid, director of the Workforce Strategy Center, says Rhode Island “is the kind of place knowledge workers want to be.”

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Julian L. Alssid, a national expert on work-force development who recently moved to Rhode Island, said the key to having an educated, employable work force is to bring together disparate elements in the state — economic development, education, employers, labor — and have them working together toward a shared vision.

“You look at your economy, and figure out where it’s going, and where you want it to go, and then what do you need to do to get your work force to where it needs to be,” Alssid said.

Alssid, 48, is executive director of the Workforce Strategy Center, a nonprofit consulting organization based in New York City that Alssid called “an applied think tank,” with projects in 21 states. The center also works at the federal level on adult education programs and career training initiatives with the U.S. departments of Education and Labor.

In Rhode Island, the center is involved with the Governor's Workforce Board, which has established industry partnerships in health care, financial services, biotechnology, construction, advanced manufacturing, marine technologies, hospitality and tourism and information technology.

J. Michael Koback, director of the work-force board, said the partnerships are designed to give industry a strong voice to ensure that the educational and economic development systems are responsive to needs. Koback said he met Alssid at a conference in Washington, D.C., last year. With financing provided by the United Way, Alssid has conducted workshops with industry partnership groups here to advise them on the best ways to meet their goals.

Alssid said part of his job is to tell people what has worked well in other states, although he said it is ultimately up to government to provide the necessary leadership. In the case of Rhode Island, a state that is facing substantial budget deficits, he said the key is to make the best use of existing resources, from the state Economic Development Corporation to the Community College of Rhode Island.

Education is vital, Alssid said, pointing out that the demand for jobs requiring some post-secondary education is growing 60 percent faster than the job market as a whole. But it needs to be the right education. "Historically, adult education has been about getting people into entry level jobs," he said. "We need to think about getting them into careers."

A native of Brookline, Mass., Alssid moved to Rhode Island last summer. "After spending the past 23 years in New York, I convinced my wife that it would be easier to raise three young children in Barrington," he said. (Alssid and his wife have 7-year-old twins and a 5-year-old.) Alssid's wife, Robin, is director of finance and administration for the Workforce Strategy Center.

"I travel all over the country, and when I looked for a place to live I was looking for something near a small city, with some culture, and a good quality of life. I also wanted something close to Washington and New York," he said. Alssid said he and his family moved here at the end of July. "So far it's been great," he said. "It feels like we've come on vacation, and the vacation just doesn't end."

Now that he's a Rhode Islander, Alssid said, he has a more personal interest in the state's economic future. "Rhode Island is right at the vortex of the transition from the old to the new economy," he said, noting that the well-paying manufacturing jobs that once sustained the state have mostly disappeared

On the plus side, Alssid pointed out that the same factors that led him to move here — an attractive quality of life, plus relatively easy access to major urban areas — are strong selling points for the state. "Rhode Island is a great place to have as a home base," he said. "This is the kind of place knowledge workers want to be," he said.

Alssid said Rhode Islanders should not just be thinking about the state, but about the region. “People need to think differently about the distances they travel. A 20-minute drive is considered a short distance in most places. A lot of the new jobs that are being created require more mobility.”

Of course, with his company still based in New York, mobility is what Alssid’s all about. “All I need is a good airport and a wireless network,” he said.

Alssid graduated from Boston University, then went to New York City where he worked in a series of jobs for the city, including assistant to the commissioner of the Department of Transportation. Then he left to become a teacher until he found himself being “bumped” from one job to another due to layoffs. After that, he became an educational policy adviser to then-New York City mayor Ed Koch, then worked for a business advocacy organization now called the Partnership for New York City.

In 1998, Alssid decided to strike out on his own and form the Workforce Strategy Center. “I was tired of being an adviser to other people. I wanted to run something on my own,” Alssid said.

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