

2025

IMPACT REPORT

Building Partnerships to Foster Agency and Strengthen Democracy



Building a Community of Changemakers

RQI's strategy is delivered through educational institutions and organizations, legal service providers, health care organizations, social service organizations, community-based organizations, and public agencies, in **all 50 states and beyond**.

Each educator, service provider, legal aid attorney, or frontline worker can work with anywhere between a handful and hundreds of people a year. By training people who are embedded in directly impacted communities, who in turn share RQI's methods with the people they serve, **our reach grows exponentially**.



RQI's Multiplier Effect

2025 By the Numbers



1,155

direct service providers in legal aid, social services, health care, adult education, and more trained through RQI's Empowerment Program.



3,649

educators trained. Trained educators reported sharing RQI resources with, on average, **21** other educators.



87,716

members of our global online network across **179** countries.



17,342

downloads of RQI's free resources.



448,000

estimated students impacted by RQI-trained educators.

Letter from the Board of Directors President

In a time when our democracy is under great stress and challenge, when many of us question how we help bridge the gap between our country's aspirations and its current realities, I continue to be struck by how the Right Question Institute's mission and approach is more important and relevant than ever.

For over 35 years, RQI has worked to build a more just and equitable democracy by strengthening people's ability to ask questions and participate in decisions that affect them. And the evidence is clear from this work: Sharing the power of questions has a transformative effect that leads to greater individual agency across different ages, fields, and communities.

Through both our Teaching and Learning Program and our Empowerment Program, RQI demonstrates how the Right Question Strategy fosters critical thinking and personal agency. In doing so, it helps people at different stages of their lives, in school and out, to step into their own power, both as learners and as citizens. Our Research Program seeks to capture the impact of this work in different contexts while also working with institutions of higher learning to explore how question formulation can be used to improve research across disciplines.



What's clear is that RQI's work is rooted in partnership and that only by developing a network of interconnecting partnerships will RQI's big dreams be realized. In this sense, RQI works as a force multiplier, helping to strengthen and amplify the work of others aligned with a vision of promoting individual and social change.

Imagine for a moment what the world could be if the power of questions was shared and practiced in all areas and levels of society, if it was valued and developed in every corner of our country, particularly in those areas farthest from political decision making and power. I believe we'd be much closer to the just and equitable democracy that drives RQI's work.

In this moment of great division and "othering," one other aspect of RQI's work I continue to think about is what becomes possible when we create spaces where we hear one another's questions rather than our opinions. My experience is that hearing others' questions as a starting point invites empathy and connection into the room. And so, for me, part of why I have always been drawn to RQI is that it enables a simple process that develops both critical thinking and empathy — two traits sorely needed right now.

I hope I've captured a little of why I believe so strongly in RQI and why I'm proud to serve as its board president. Your support and partnership fuel RQI's daily work and its big visions for change, and we are deeply grateful. Thank you for being such a vital part of RQI's community.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "John Esterle". The signature is fluid and cursive, written in a professional style.

**President of the Board of Directors
Right Question Institute**

Building Agency and Strengthening Democracy

“

The Right Question Strategy clarified my thinking and helped me decide what the most important information I want [is] and role I want to have in the decision. [It] increased my capacity to advocate for myself.

- Training participant, 2025

”

This year, service providers, legal aid lawyers, community activists, adult educators, and frontline workers have faced a uniquely uncertain and difficult landscape that is shifting under their feet. RQI's newly renamed Empowerment Program helps those working in low-income communities become catalysts for the agency of the people they serve. People who feel more agency become more confident, motivated, and able to take action on their own behalf and on behalf of their

communities. Using RQI's methods, people learn to advocate for themselves and their needs alongside service providers who advocate for them, creating a multiplier effect. RQI's methods also help people connect decisions made in their daily interactions with public institutions and systems with decisions made elsewhere, creating new pathways to democratic participation. New pathways are needed now more than ever.

Partnering Across the Country for Access to Justice and Legal Empowerment

In 2025, RQI worked with a nationwide network of legal empowerment practitioners to share resources and support grassroots justice efforts, and presented at the International Access to Justice Forum.



U.S. Legal Empowerment Network leadership convening

Self-Advocacy Skills in Adult Education Classrooms



Earldine Tolbert, a restorative justice trainer-facilitator and former adult educator, first encountered RQI through a voter engagement program in Philadelphia. She has championed the use of the QFT in adult education, literacy programs, and community circles. In our [Empowerment Spotlight blog series](#), Earldine shared how she used the QFT to help her students understand their power. “People don’t even realize they have the right to ask questions of people who make such big decisions about their daily life.”

Recounting a story of one of her students successfully avoiding an unlawful eviction, Earldine shared, “After hearing [this student’s] story, everybody started going back and asking questions. They were excited for her because she tried it in real life and it worked. They felt more empowered to ask questions on their own.”

In 2025, we partnered with the Open Door Collective of Literacy Minnesota and the Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy to create a “community of practice” of adult foundational educators. These educators are using RQI’s methods to help their students advocate more effectively for themselves and navigate systems where decisions are made that affect their daily lives and the lives of their families.

“Creating a space where people can step into their power”: Community organizing using the Right Question Strategy

Dr. Alexandra Piñeros-Shields, a professor at Brandeis University and a longtime community organizer, educator, and advocate, first learned about RQI as an adult educator working in New Hampshire. She used RQI’s strategy to teach political and economic literacy to her students, who went on to advocate for change in the state child welfare agency.

She later applied the strategy in her work as a community organizer, supporting community members in a successful police accountability campaign. As she shared with us, the strategy “creates a space where people can step into their power.” You can read more of her story in our [Empowerment Spotlight blog series](#).

Client Empowerment in Public Services and SNAP Employment & Training

We worked with case managers in Rhode Island and Connecticut who help administer the SNAP Employment & Training (E&T) program, preparing individuals receiving public benefits for job training and seeking employment. The case managers who joined our training work in refugee resettlement, financial literacy, vocational training, and other direct service programs.

Case managers for SNAP E&T have faced enormous challenges in 2025. RQI has been working to amplify what they are able to achieve by sharing a strategy that helps SNAP participants become more effective self-advocates

and job seekers and achieve long-term self-sufficiency. As a direct service provider in Rhode Island said, "It's great to be able to give [clients] the tools for their own self-advocacy, having them feel confident and that they have a voice, so once they no longer have that additional support, they feel confident to get the information they need."

One financial literacy coach in the training shared how clients' beliefs about their own capacity to address their problems shifted after using QFT, and the clients became more engaged and eager to take action on their own behalf. Here is one client's reflection:

5 What did you learn? How can you use it?

This tool allows me to ask myself real questions
 - got me thinking, shows me pathways I should consider
 - allows me to start an action plan to fix my problems



Groups at work at RQI's session at the Federal Policy Reserve Summit on community engagement

Reaching Teachers and Students Across the Country and Fostering More Curious, Equitable Classrooms

RQI's Teaching and Learning Program partners with schools, districts, state departments of education, and other educational organizations to support educators to foster more equitable, curious classrooms in which every child feels empowered to ask and pursue their own questions. Students who ask their own questions show increased engagement, comprehension, and discovery and ultimately become more nimble, democratic thinkers who feel greater agency in their learning and in their lives beyond the classroom walls.

A Change in Practice that 'Sticks': Impact of the Question Formulation Technique on Teachers and Students

In 2025, we surveyed RQI's educator network on the impact of RQI's methods:

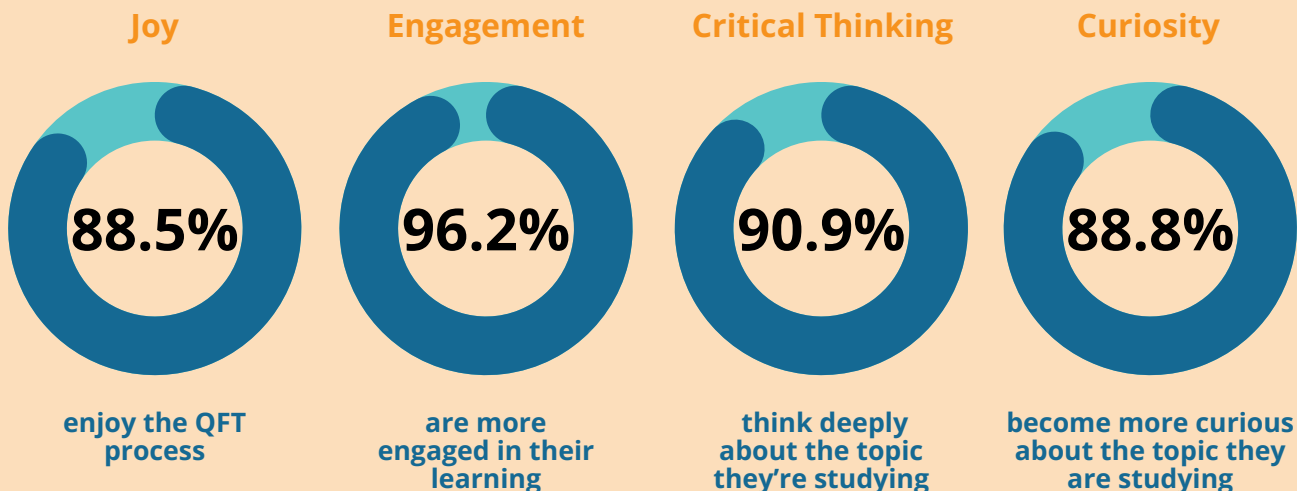
89% of educators reported that using the QFT has made them a more effective teacher.

“It is helping me to be the kind of teacher I want to be--reducing my teacher-directed lectures and increasing student centered inquiry and research. I get to conference with them and work with them to refine questions and find answers instead of guessing what they want to know or deciding what they should know without their input or buy in.”

92% of educators agreed that using the QFT improved their ability to foster student engagement.

“I knew I was on the right track when my students started complaining that I was making them think too much! The Question Formulation Technique has shifted the focus from me giving answers to them actively engaging, questioning, and truly grappling with the material.”

Teachers report that students who use the QFT experience:



Partnering to Support Rural Educators

In 2025, we advanced a special initiative to support educators in rural communities who are often underrepresented and underserved by traditional professional learning. We partnered with the six state education departments to offer virtual professional learning to more than 530 teachers in rural areas. Together, we amplified the innovative work rural teachers are doing every day to foster critical thinking through inquiry-based learning.

In Montana, teachers across the state now have access to a series of free online courses that prepare them to implement the QFT to engage students in thinking critically about primary sources and student-led historical inquiry. Courses were developed in collaboration with the Montana Office of Public Instruction, thanks to generous support from the Library of Congress Teaching with Primary Sources program.

Evaluations from Montana educators who completed the course have been overwhelmingly positive:

100% of course participants would recommend the course to a colleague.

97% were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with their learning experience.

97% found it “relevant” or “very relevant” to their curriculum.



Montana high school social studies teacher Wesley Webb, who designed and implemented a QFT lesson featured in the course, shared:

This experience has me rethinking everything I do, or at least, it has me thinking about how to reorient the material I have such that students can take the wheel ... teaching this way has transformed my perspective on what the ‘teacher’ can really do for their students more than any educational project or professional development I’ve ever participated in.

Webb’s students shared:

Instead of just absorbing the knowledge, applying questions while studying the constitution helped me think more about why it functions that way and how it does, and also to recognize its potential flaws and disconsiderations

Questioning forced me to think deeper about the content I was learning and move past surface level information.

The Power of Question Formulation for Arts Education

As music composer Leonard Bernstein once wrote, “a work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them.” In 2025, we expanded RQI’s footprint in arts education by training 200 arts educators and creating new visual and performing arts resources to support them as they move into practice.



New York-based music educator, Yating Yang shared the impact of RQI’s methods on her music students:

“I also witnessed firsthand how instrumental students who started as timid and reluctant to express their thoughts opened up to asking questions. High-achieving students are often afraid to give the “wrong” answers ... With time, their inquisitive nature took over as they continued to sharpen their question-asking skills.”

Building Sustained Partnerships and Collaborations

RQI launched a biannual webinar series to highlight ongoing collaborations with longstanding partners and the impact of sustainable communities of practice. Partners including the National Council of History Education and Maine Department of Education shared how they made QFT modules a regular part of their rural-focused, place-based teacher programs.

Meanwhile, RQI’s two long-running, popular online courses that run four times a year in partnership with the

Harvard Graduate School of Education trained 935 teachers from 51 countries last year. Participants in these courses have gone on to create flourishing communities of practice that reshape the educational ecosystems in which they work from Mobile, Alabama, where foreign language teacher Chelsea Lawrence created a schoolwide QFT professional learning community, to Manila, Philippines, where educator John Israel Cunanan created a pilot project to scale the QFT through the Teacher Education Council (TEC) Fellows Program.



RQI leads a keynote presentation for the Science Education Council of Ohio in January 2025.

Introducing RQI's Research Program: From Observation to Evidence

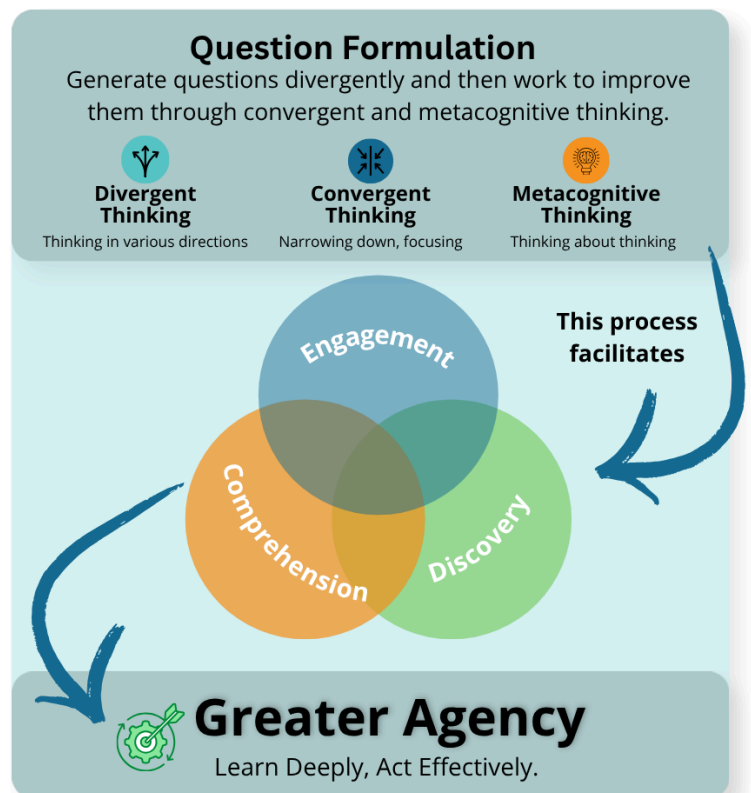
The Research Program aims to ensure that evidence drives our understanding of how people change when they learn to formulate their own questions by supporting research on the Right Question Strategy (RQS) and facilitating the dissemination of findings. The RQS has demonstrated reach across education, health, voter engagement, and beyond — and we support the growth of an evidence base, grounded in practice, to validate the transformative power of question formulation. We collaborate with researchers, faculty, practitioners, and funders who share a commitment to cultivating agency and evidence-based practice. Whether your interest is in partnership, research design, field access, or philanthropic investment, we invite you to be part of this work.

Making Sense of What We See: A Theory of Question Formulation

For 35 years, RQI consistently witnessed and heard significant, even transformative changes — not limited to cognitive but also affective and behavioral — taking place when people formulate questions.

To make sense of those patterns, RQI synthesized multiple sources of evidence, including observable changes documented by facilitators, users' self-reported changes, and existing research studies. We distilled these sources into a Theory of Question Formulation — a grounded framework that explains *what consistently happens when people learn to formulate their own questions*. The theory identifies three categories— engagement, comprehension, and discovery — facilitated by formulating questions, leading to greater agency in thinking, learning, and taking action. Two applications of the theory explain specific changes under each category, aligning with RQI's two major outcomes: learning and empowerment.

THEORY OF QUESTION FORMULATION



Changing practice at Southern New Hampshire University

At Southern New Hampshire University, Associate Professors Chris Blais and Karin Heffernan cultivated an interdisciplinary community of practice around the QFT. Securing an internal grant, they piloted the QFT with faculty across three schools at the university, invited RQI staff to campus for an introductory workshop, and recruited eight faculty to trial the QFT and participate in a community of practice in fall 2025. Through sustained support — group sessions, one-on-one consultations, and shared resources — they helped faculty adopt the QFT across disciplines. Crucially, data was collected alongside implementation, creating the foundation for rigorous analysis of the QFT's impact.

Their work culminated in a Q-Expo last December, where nine faculty members

presented posters on their implementation and its impacts, and student groups shared reflections on their learning. Students felt greater ownership and enjoyment; faculty were surprised by the depth of student engagement across disciplines.

11

faculty
members

36

academic
courses

676

students
reached

In one semester, 11 faculty members implemented the QFT in 36 courses, reaching 676 students. The SNHU collaboration demonstrates that sustainable adoption requires more than an effective method — it requires conditions in which faculty feel supported in experimenting, learning, and sharing.

“

...If we could encourage students to discover and embrace their curiosity with questioning, that will be the kind of impact that can carry on with a student long after they have graduated.

— Chris Blais, Associate Professor, SNHU

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Q-Expo, Southern New Hampshire University

Growing Evidence Base of the impact of Right Question Strategy (RQS)

Three recently published studies reinforce the effectiveness of RQS in diverse settings.

Pineros-Shields, A. (2024). Group Work to Promote Leadership Among Undocumented Immigrant Latinas. In *A Handbook of Contemporary Group Work Practice*, 357-369. Oxford University Press.

This case study documents the use of the QFT in a social work context to support leadership development and agency in communities among marginalized women facing significant structural challenges.

Quinlan, J., & Edwards, M. T. (2025). Classroom Applications of Question Formulation to Support Problem-Solving in Computer Science. *Journal of Computational Science Education*, 16(2), 10-15.

This classroom study demonstrates that in undergraduate introductory programming courses where high failure and dropout rates are often seen, the QFT helped students become more confident, more engaged, and more invested in their own learning, shifting them from passive participants to active knowledge-builders.

Irdalisa, I., Akbar, B., Fuadi, T. M., Maesaroh, M., & Kartikawati, E. (2024). RICOSRE Model With Question Formulation Technique (QFT): Enhancing Students' Higher-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and Science Literacy. *Jurnal Penelitian Pendidikan IPA*, 10(3), 1175-1178.

In a controlled study of 296 fifth-grade students across three public schools in Indonesia, those who learned with the QFT and RICORSE model, a problem-solving learning framework, significantly outperformed peers who received direct instruction on both higher-order thinking skills and science literacy.

Exploring the Power of Questions at Yale

The Yale Cultivating Conversation Fellowship invited RQI to introduce the QFT to its student fellows, representing undergraduate and graduate programs across the university. The fellows learned how to “share the power of questions” as a way to ensure that more voices are heard in community conversations, creating space for different ideas to be heard and articulated. At a second workshop open to all Yale staff, co-sponsored by Yale Learn & Grow, participants learned how to use the QFT to enhance problem-solving, decision-making capacity, and leadership abilities.

One participant shared:

“It made me think of the power of asking questions, no matter what answers you get. Just to ask the question can be a way to open up new avenues of thought.”



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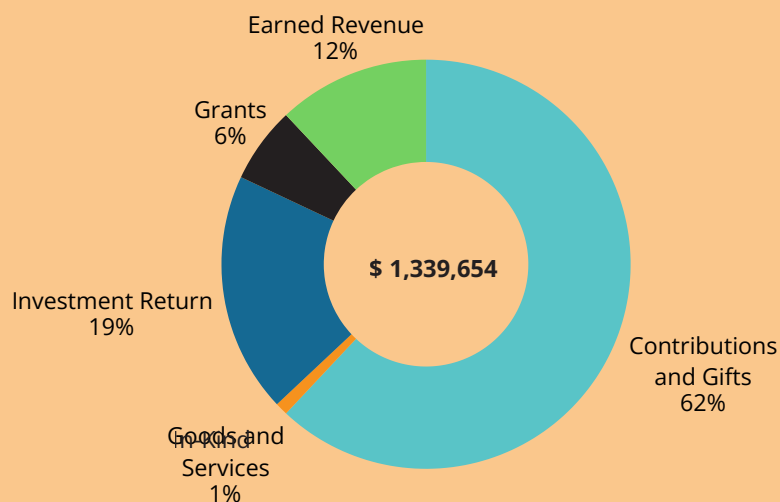
Alexandra Piñeros Shields *(joined March 2026)*

Stephen Quatrano

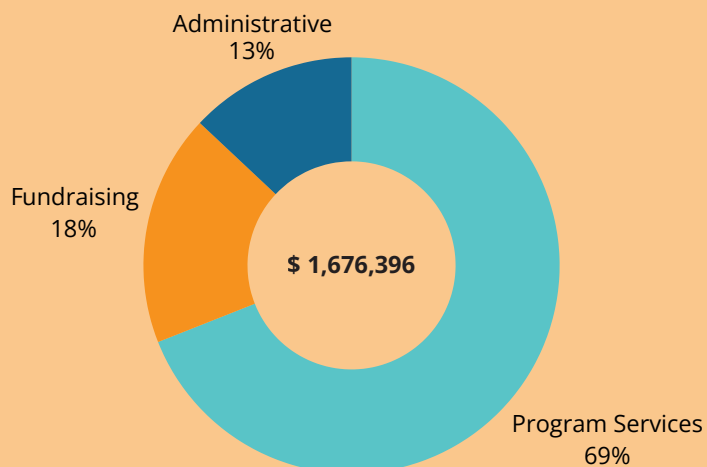
Mary M. Wendell

Financials

FY25 operating revenue



FY25 operating expenses



\$1,202,521 Operating revenue
 \$1,672,350 Operating expenses
 -\$469,829 Net operating revenue
 \$133,087 Unrealized gains on investments
 \$2,950,384 Cash reserves and equity

Welcome RQI's new board vice president!

Evy Peña is an award-winning advocate and narrative strategist with expertise in labor rights, immigration, gender equity, and children's rights. She currently serves as Director of Advocacy and Communications at the Women's Equality Center, where she leads political strategy and communications campaigns to expand reproductive access across Latin America. Evy has spearheaded transnational efforts to promote labor protections, mobilized civil society around global events like the 2026 FIFA World Cup, and trained hundreds of organizers and worker leaders in media advocacy. Her work blends litigation, digital organizing, grassroots strategy, and media, and has been featured in news outlets including Bloomberg, The Wall Street Journal, The Associated Press, and Reuters.

With Deep Appreciation to Our 2025 Supporters

You Make Our Work Possible

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Manuel and Maxine Lerman	Library of Congress, Teaching with Primary Sources Program	
Mark and Joan Lohr	National Science Foundation	

Our Vision

An equitable world and vibrant democracy in which all people have the agency to think and act on their own behalf.

Our Mission

RQI advances an original educational strategy that makes it possible for all people to ask their own questions. The transformational skill of asking questions enhances learning, promotes empowerment, and strengthens democracy. People — including those furthest from power — can use this skill to think and learn independently, participate meaningfully in decisions that affect them, and advocate on behalf of themselves, their families, and their communities.

The Right Question Strategy

The Right Question Strategy (RQS) is a unique educational approach that develops people's skills of formulating one's own questions and focusing on decisions that affect them. The RQS includes two key methods: the Question Formulation Technique and the Voice in Decisions Technique. The strategy is delivered through educational institutions and organizations, legal service providers, health care organizations, social service organizations, community-based organizations, and public agencies, in all 50 states and beyond.

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