

For Immediate Release
Thursday, November 8, 2018

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Op-Ed -- Critical advice: Education beyond high school matters

By Jeb Spaulding, Chancellor

It's true: not everyone needs to go to college. But consider this: over 95 percent of the jobs created since the Great Recession ten years ago have gone to workers with at least some college education, according to Georgetown University, while those with a high school diploma were left behind. The recession decimated low-skill, blue-collar and clerical jobs; the recovery added primarily high-skill, managerial and professional jobs.

Consider this too: last month the national unemployment rate was double for those with only a high school diploma as opposed to a bachelor's degree. And, as a group, citizens who do not continue their education beyond high school are much more likely to live in poverty, have more health problems, and to have children who also do not pursue education beyond high school.

So let's think twice before doubting the value of a college degree. Certainly, there are avenues other than a traditional college pathway to acquire the skills necessary to enter the workforce. Apprenticeships, for example, can lead to good paying jobs. But don't fool yourself--the vast majority of jobs created in the coming years will require a college degree. If we are serious about closing the income and opportunity gap, we should be encouraging, not discouraging, Vermonters to pursue a college education.

But we are hindering our own efforts. By providing the lowest level of state funding in the country to our public colleges and universities, we are discouraging Vermonters from going to college. While we have one of the very highest high school graduation rates in the country, we have the lowest rate of continuation from high school to college in New England. That limits the economic and social prospects of too many Vermont families, and it is becoming an increasing drag on Vermont's economy and human services budget.

Where do most Vermonters get their degrees? In the Vermont State Colleges System (Castleton University, Community College of Vermont, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College). We are the post-secondary extension of the PreK-12 public school system. Over 80 percent of our students are Vermonters, nearly opposite all of the other colleges and universities in the state. Like our PreK-12 partners, we proudly serve a wide range of students, from valedictorians to those who have struggled in school, and often in life. Half of our students are the first in their family to attend college.

It is truly impressive how much the Vermont State Colleges System has done, despite inadequate funding support from the State. We have fantastic faculties and dedicated staff who continue to innovate and create more non-degree credentials and employer partnerships. They are using advanced technology

and flexible scheduling to serve more working Vermonters, while providing a wide range of relevant associate's, bachelor's, and master's degree programs.

But, access to an affordable and quality public higher education system will become increasingly endangered in Vermont unless our Governor and Legislature make a long-term commitment to ongoing, moderate, and sustainable increases in funding for the Vermont State Colleges System.

Fortunately, we have a rare opportunity to increase funding for the Vermont State Colleges System without raising taxes or fees. A recent US Supreme Court decision requires states, including Vermont, to collect sales taxes on all internet retail purchases. This is projected to add between \$4 and \$5 million in unexpected new revenues to State coffers this year, another \$7 million next year, and ultimately \$15 to \$20 million annually.

This NEW money would be pivotal to providing Vermonters with more affordable access to high quality public higher education. Whether you are an employer challenged to find sufficient talent, a citizen concerned about the economy and state budget, or a student or family worried about affording a future college degree, please let the Governor and your legislators know that you support using the new internet sales tax revenue to support the Vermont State Colleges System.

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