

To: Long Range Planning Committee

From: Jeb Spaulding, Chancellor

Date: August 23, 2019

Re: A summary of feedback regarding the “Serving Vermont’s Students by Securing the Future of the Vermont State Colleges System” white paper

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This memo summarizes the process and input taken to date by the Long Range Planning Committee (LRPC) as part of the “Serving Vermont’s Students by Securing the Future of the Vermont State Colleges System” initiative. A separate document will list all the thoughts and ideas received to date.

At its May 29<sup>th</sup> meeting, the LRPC received a presentation from the Chancellor about a proposed committee workplan to educate the Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) community at large about the urgent challenges facing higher education institutions generally and the VSCS in particular, and to then identify a range of specific actions Trustees could take to secure its future for the benefit of Vermont. The Chancellor’s intent is to bring any agreed-upon LRPC recommendations requiring approval by the Board of Trustees to the December Board meeting for consideration and possible action.

On June 19<sup>th</sup>, Chancellor Spaulding presented the LRPC with the first draft of a white paper outlining six critical challenges. The Committee accepted the draft and approved an outreach schedule for June, July and August to solicit feedback on the paper and to begin to gather ideas for solutions. This outreach by LRPC members and the Chancellor included on-campus meetings with Presidents and their leadership teams, two system-wide Zoom meetings, and a roundtable with Vermont thought leaders:

July 15: Northern Vermont University President Elaine Collins and leadership team

July 24: First system-wide Zoom meeting

July 29: Vermont Technical College President Pat Moulton and leadership team

August 5: Castleton University President Karen Scolforo and leadership team

August 15: Community College of Vermont President Joyce Judy and leadership team

August 15: Second system-wide Zoom meeting

August 20: Meeting with bargaining unit leaders

August 22: Informal Roundtable, Vermont thought leaders

## Summary of Input

Input gathered at each outreach session was combined with thoughts and ideas shared via email to the [securethefuture@vsc.edu](mailto:securethefuture@vsc.edu) email address, comments to media outlets responding to articles about the project, and from small group conversations with members of VSCS faculty and staff. What follows is a summary of this input. It is not meant to be exhaustive, but to capture recurring themes and ideas.

### *Consensus*

Throughout the initial eight input sessions the LRPC engaged with a wide variety of VSCS stakeholders in which three broad themes consistently emerged:

1. The VSCS has unique strengths and its role is critical for Vermont: Faculty, staff and administrators emphasized the system's strengths and the critical role it plays in Vermont are recognized in the white paper. When the Board articulates challenges faced by the system, it should also articulate how significant VSCS institutions are for students, for communities, and for the Vermont economy. Trustees were cautioned to preserve what is currently working well at every level: "changes shouldn't come at the expense of our strengths."
2. The challenges we face are real: Comments also reflected firm consensus that the white paper accurately and comprehensively captured the challenges facing the VSCS..
3. There is a pressing need for action: Recurring comments like "we can't keep nibbling around the edges" reveal a frustration with the status quo and a desire for bold action to confront our challenges. In fact, every input session moved quickly to discussions of potential solutions to the challenges we face.

### *Suggestions for change in academic programming:*

A strong consensus emerged about the need to address program duplication and redundancy across the system:

- There could be a "more effective process for modeling universal cost tracking" related to program delivery.

- Programs could be weighed against each other for cost of delivery, enrollment and academic overlap.
- To reduce costs, should the system have a process to choose where a program will be delivered?
- Could degree programs be shared across more than one college to increase the availability of courses for students?
- Easier transfer pathways for students might boost enrollment in four-year programs.
- “It seems like an entrepreneurial spirit encouraged at the colleges puts us in competition with each other.”

Many suggested new academic program delivery methods should be tried in order to meet the needs of working-age students. Three-year degrees, more stackable credentials, and expanded online course offerings were all put forward as means to support more Vermonters who need or want to complete their education. More robust degree completion opportunities and better use of prior learning assessment programs system-wide could bolster Vermont’s attainment rate and increase enrollment.

Each session included suggestions to focus on Vermont workforce needs, the needs of students who have not gone on to post-secondary education after high school, and the needs of students who have completed some college but not a degree or credential. An effort to increase the number of associate degree programs, apprenticeships, certificates and training might better meet employers’ needs and provide students with relevant, affordable opportunities to advance their education and careers.

Many suggested VSCS colleges should find ways to better compete in the online marketplace. Several participants suggested our online courses focus on personalized learning and high-quality instruction. Others suggested that each college find a content area niche to offer online. Should only one entity in the system devote necessary resources to build robust and marketable online programs? Supplemental support for faculty adoption of Canvas would be helpful, as would ongoing support for instructional design. Limited resources and the lack of mandate for adoption of technologies are impediments. Scarcity may restrict the ability of colleges to “transition to online or low residency programs” while maintaining quality.

Given scarce resources for innovation, there is a need for prioritization: “The most important change [in any plan the Board proposes] will be what we say ‘no’ to versus what we say ‘yes’ to.

*Suggestions for structural changes:*

The VSCS should analyze the use of, need for, and viability of its current physical footprint, the toll of excessive deferred maintenance, and lost enrollment opportunities due to outdated infrastructure. The latter “is daunting for our budgets.” Inability to invest in facilities impacts admissions: “it’s tough to market this campus to students.” Reducing a college’s physical footprint would allow for more focused infrastructure investments. Suggestions included consolidating multiple campuses into one or fewer. In the same vein, “could our colleges be sharing spaces more?” For example, could colleges eventually share space in a place like Bennington where they are all delivering – or hoping to deliver -- programs? Commenters wondered if the system or individual colleges have assessed dorm vacancy rates and explored alternative uses that might generate revenue. Some of these opportunities may be tied to Vermont’s tourism economy or to the need for housing, especially for Vermont’s aging population.

With lessons learned and outcomes emerging from NVU unification, are there further consolidations that make sense within the system? For example, a closer academic alignment between Vermont Tech and CCV might bring more focus to “career education” delivered across the state. Alternatively, we should be mindful of our brand legacies: “Vermont Tech’ sounds like a two-year school, but it is a four year school.”

Shared services at the system level should be increased to save on resources, but we should always account for actual cost-savings and changes to customer service. Can we increase shared resources? The Chancellor’s office should either grow to provide more centralized functions and shared services or, possibly, its functions should be dispersed to the colleges. In a substantially more centralized system, there would not be a need for very senior leaders at each college. Should the system also look at structural centralization, such as the benefit of becoming one, single accredited institution, or a closer network of colleges like the SUNY system? In any plan, governance structures should be considered to better support individual colleges – not just the system -- in areas like cost reductions and development. “It is important to have alumni on the Board to offer these perspectives.”

*New approaches to marketing and branding:*

Many believe new approaches to marketing could have a positive impact on enrollment. As a start, one participant suggested polling guidance counselors – in addition to the Agency of Education, principals and superintendents -- to get their take on how the VSCS can better serve traditional college-going students, as well as the 40% of high school graduates who are not continuing on to college. VSCS alumni might be tapped to help recruit more students. Overall, more aggressive marketing efforts to regions with more high school graduates, or internationally,

would be helpful. We should consider students from nearby Canada who want a foothold in the States. “We should market better to VSAC and high school guidance counselors.”

We need to continue to promote our value to the Legislature. “Make a stronger argument for state funding.”

Early College and Dual Enrollment programs are opportunities and should be marketed more and expanded to ensure full and equitable access for all students. Similarly, the value of a two-year degree and other credentials should be marketed.

### *Revisions to the White Paper*

As a result of input the Committee received over the summer, the Chancellor’s Office has made several revisions to the white paper.

Vision statement revision. The list of elements in the vision for the future of the VSCS has been re-ordered and revised to reflect the priorities articulated at the input sessions.

Strengths of the system. In each meeting, college leaders reminded the Committee that the white paper should emphasize the strengths of their institutions and the System, especially in light of the clear risks posed by external challenges and outlined starkly in the white paper. Strengths have been highlighted more clearly in this revised draft of the white paper.

Recognition of growing poverty in Vermont. If declining numbers of traditional-aged college students in Vermont will impact our enrollment, it is important to acknowledge that those Vermonters who do come in our doors will have fewer resources. The number of 18 year-olds who live in households that qualify for public assistance peaked in 2014 at 27% and only tapered to 25% in 2017; these facts are detailed in the latest draft.

Role of bargaining units in the system. Language in the initial draft of the white paper raised concerns that the Board might intend to undermine union contracts or tenure. The Board and the Chancellor reassured participants that this language was not meant to undermine either, but to recognize these may impact our ability to innovate rapidly. This language was clarified in the current version.

Financial transparency. A chart has been added to the white paper illustrating systemwide functional expenses over the last five years.

## **Conclusion.**

I am continually impressed by the thoughtfulness and passion of the faculty, staff, and administrators at all levels of the VSCS. The input summarized here reflects creative, careful thinking and concern for the future. The revised white paper remains very similar to the June 26 draft, with several changes that reflect input we received this summer. I am sure this input will be essential to the LRPC's work on action steps needed to Secure the Future.

Jeb