

Investing in Vermont's Future: The Vermont State Colleges System

Jeb Spaulding, Chancellor, Vermont State Colleges System, January 6, 2020

With the Legislature back in session and the Governor putting the finishing touches on his budget proposal for the next fiscal year, it is a good time to remind ourselves why Vermonters deserve meaningful increases in funding for the Vermont State College System (VSCS).

The VSCS, which includes Castleton University, the Community College of Vermont, Northern Vermont University and Vermont Technical College, continues to be the in-state destination for two thirds of Vermonters attending college in Vermont, or over 9,500 students, with another 5,000 in continuing education programs.

However, in contrast to State funding of public PreK-12 education, which is at one of the highest levels in the country, Vermont's funding for our public colleges continues to rank at the very bottom. The consequences are obvious: we need to charge higher tuition and fees to offset lack of state support, which means Vermont families pay more to attend college and they shoulder more student debt. It also means many Vermonters cannot afford to attend college at all. Despite having one of the best high school graduation rates, Vermont has the lowest continuation rate from high school to college in all New England.

This is a serious problem for Vermont's future. Helping our citizens become the kind of productive workers our employers need requires education beyond high school. 100% of Vermont's high-growth, high-wage jobs through 2028 are projected to require education or training after high school. Yet, low State funding for the Vermont State Colleges System discourages Vermonters from getting the opportunities they deserve and discourages employers from coming to and staying in our state.

Now, it isn't that Governor Scott and recent Legislatures have not been supportive of the Vermont State Colleges System. They have been. Their support has been essential in the increasingly challenging world of higher education. However, despite their efforts, public colleges in other New England states and New York, our competitors, still receive almost twice as much state support as Vermont public colleges do. This is the result of a decades-long legacy of underfunding the Colleges. It will take years of increased support to put us back on track.

Specifically, the VSCS receives about 17% of its annual revenue from the State of Vermont. Just to be in line with other regional public colleges, the VSCS would need to receive about 30% of its revenue from the State, or additional annual funding of \$23.5 million. That is why the VSCS is requesting annual increases in state support of \$5 million per year for the next several years. Without this funding, tuition will only rise further, fewer Vermont families will choose to attend college, and Vermont's employers and its population outlook will continue to suffer.

Back in 1970, roughly 15% of State General Fund revenues went to support higher education. Now about 2% of State General Fund revenues go to support higher education; moving the needle to 3% would provide the funding we are requesting. In 1970, Vermont ranked 28th in the country in terms of higher education support for higher education per capita. Now we rank 48th. We have a long way

to go to catch up, but we have provided the necessary level of support in the past and can do so again.

It is impressive how much the VSCS is doing, despite such undeniably inadequate financial support from the State. Our colleges and universities continue to innovate to serve the evolving needs of Vermont's students and employers:

- They are offering more non-degree credentials and expanding lower cost options for students.
- Students in the new Castleton University School of Resort Management at Killington are earning their degrees in three years and earning money while learning on-site; the strategic expansion of the Castleton nursing program in Bennington is addressing a critical, state-wide need.
- The Community College of Vermont is running three new apprenticeship programs where students are earning money while they learn to be pharmacy technicians, medical assistants, and manufacturing technicians and expanding employer partnerships statewide.
- Northern Vermont University has launched new degrees in data science and digital communications, offering relevant programs that meet today's workforce needs. Through NVU's core curriculum, students generate solutions to some of society's greatest challenges, including climate change, social justice and sustainability.
- Vermont Tech's new radiologic science program, innovative nursing degree design, apprenticeship programs and partnerships with employers of all types around the state is preparing more Vermonters for critical, high demand careers.
- Across the VSCS, new online learning and flexible scheduling options are enabling many more Vermonters to access education and training to improve their economic and social prospects.

The VSCS has taken aggressive steps to reduce costs and become more efficient, while expanding student opportunities. Shared services and consolidated business functions are a priority. Rightsizing efforts are underway. Hundreds fewer employees are on our payroll. Healthcare and retirement plans have been reconfigured, saving the system millions. Two colleges have been consolidated into a single, stronger institution, achieving significant administrative savings, while innovating and evolving to meet student needs.

Three years ago, former VSCS Board Chair Martha O'Connor and I warned that Vermont was reaching a tipping point. Vermonter's access to an affordable and quality public higher education system is increasingly at risk. Since then, four independent colleges have decided to close their doors in Vermont. For the sake of current and future Vermont students and employees, let's hope the Governor and Legislature continue to sustain the Vermont State Colleges System through predictable and meaningful appropriations increases. Maintaining access to high quality and affordable public postsecondary education in all corners of Vermont is not just an economic imperative, it is an economic lifeline for our citizens.