Memo: Task Force Update to Board of Trustees Long Term Planning Committee
Date: July 23, 2020

The VSCS Forward Task Force (Task Force) was charged by the VSCS Board of Trustees (Board) with providing concrete recommendations for moving the system toward a sustainable future that provides a high-quality education for students. As the Task Force began our work, we painfully acknowledged that the challenging fiscal situation of the VSCS is compounded by the impact of COVID-19 and the public health and economic crisis that followed. The Task Force responded to the charge, and took on the responsibility, with a student-centered focus and approach.

This memo describes an acknowledgement of the current situation of VSCS, the Task Force work to date (June 11-July 22), and outlines the guiding principles, process, and ideas discussed to date. The Task Force will provide ideas and recommendations to the Chancellor and Board mid-August.

Current Situation of VSCS

--Years of underfunding and practices of "doing more with less" have substantially weakened the system and its institutions. This is universally recognized by members of the VSCS internally and well-documented publicly. (Secure the Future White Paper, Jim Page report, NVU faculty survey results)

--Public spending on education in Vermont is unevenly distributed across the preK-16 continuum, with approximately $18k spent per Vermont K-12 student and less than $5k spent per student on education beyond high school. This significant difference is something the state and Vermonters will want to consider for a successful future of its citizens.

-- Legislative leaders assured the VSCS that they will provide funding for one year. At the same time, the timeframe to achieve many of the system-strengthening and system-transformation options identified by faculty, staff, and students at our institutions is necessarily much longer.

--While the average state appropriations share of New England public higher education systems' operating budgets is currently 31.5%, the VSCS receives only about half this amount (17%). To reach a comparable proportion of funding to other New England public systems, Vermont would need to invest $25 million more annually in the system. (Put another way, if VSCS's current level of state funding ($32 million in FY2020) represented 31.5% of its operating budget, the system would have to shrink by 45%, from approximately $180 million operation to a $101 million operation.)

Values

As a guide to its deliberations and recommendations, the Task Force agreed upon a set of values:

- ❖ We will be bold and apply visionary thinking in the recommendations.
  - ○ This means we have a willingness to think beyond the boundaries of what we know now.
  - ○ We see this time as a rare opportunity given health and economic crisis.
  - ○ Some of our ideas could be completely new and different.

- ❖ We will provide a quality, student-driven education to learners. Decisions are learner-centered and student-driven.
  - ○ Quality is defined as: given the cost of the VSCS education, it is worth it by providing students with opportunities to pursue their dreams. Our students are prepared for the workforce, effective participants in civil life, have broader viewpoints, and better health.

- ❖ The Task Force will seek input from stakeholders including students, faculty and staff, workforce, and communities.

- ❖ We will be innovative, responsive, and flexible.

- ❖ We will act with a sense of urgency to make recommendations and adapt to current circumstances.

- ❖ We will focus on access and affordability.

  - ○ Access to education (not necessarily geography). Rural students need access through technology and a flexible approach to learning.
  - ○ Affordability means students have the time, money, and less debt/loans.

- ❖ We are looking ahead, beyond this year and next. Who do we want to serve and how do we serve students 5, 10, 15 years from now?

- ❖ We care about workforce development. With a VSCS education, students will be able to meet their dreams and are employable.

❖ We exist for the benefit of Vermont. We must consider the pockets of in-state students we can serve better.

❖ Out-of-state students are also crucial to our VSCS success and Vermont's future. Many students from out of state plan to join the VT community.

❖ We value diversity in our VSCS student population, faculty, the approach, and programs.

❖ We will think as a system, rather than as individual institutions.
  ○ We are stronger if we capitalize on strengths, recognize weaknesses, and don't compete against each other. (Competition examples: financial aid, academic programs, etc.).
  ○ The task force will set collaboration between institutions as a goal.

❖ We value fairness. Sometimes this means consistency and sometimes it means equity.

Task Force Process

After agreeing on shared values, and reviewing the input from stakeholders to date, the Task Force decided on the following process:

In a discussion format, the Task Force explored challenges, questions, and opportunities related to accreditation, the VSCS footprint, accessibility, affordability, and governance. We looked at data, stakeholder input to date, had conversations with the Maine system staff and the VSCS Board Chair, and then surfaced ideas (see below) from our discussions.

The next steps for the Task Force for the next couple weeks are to generate some alternative models of the future of the VSCS and continue stakeholder engagement. By creating a variety of solutions for the future of the VSCS, our Task Force will weigh the costs and benefits of different approaches.

Task Force Stakeholder Engagement

The Task Force reviewed input from Labor Task Force Town Halls, "VTC Request for Transformative Ideas", NVU Strong, House Speaker Mitzi Johnson's Idea Bank, VSCS Thrive!, a VSC Student Association presentation and feedback with Ryan Cooney and Alexandra Huff, and ideas provided to the Task Force through the VSC.edu website. Information about the Task Force's work can be found at https://www.vsc.edu/board-of-trustees/vscsforward/.

The Task Force is planning to connect with faculty assemblies, unions, and staff on our ideas to date. We will also send out surveys to school counselors, students, and businesses/employers. We hope to collect input in the surveys that provide perspectives on the question of "as they look to the future, what do these groups want from the VSCS?" What are the strengths, opportunities, characteristics of the system they wish to maintain or see in the future?

Task Force Ideas To Date

Below you will find our Task Force list of ideas under consideration to date. The Task Force recognizes, and we are comfortable, that each of our ideas requires process, some potential investments in technologies, and broadband access. There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, and the VSCS should differentiate strategies by program.

Accessibility

1. Prioritize state money for in-state programs (VSAC funding but also other sources of funding that goes to training and credential programs).

2. Offer flexible programs that meet students needs such as: low-residency programs with shorter times on campus, intensive programming, accelerated courses/programs, shorter-term credentials and programs, and regular weekend and evening classes to allow for more diverse cohorts of students using facilities.

3. Significantly expand and invest in telepresence and telepresence-like options, and online delivery. Telepresence allows flexibility of offering a program or a class at multiple sites. This investment could include:

   ❖ Making all classrooms telepresence capable. There are scheduling conflicts with too few classrooms offering this option.
   ❖ Providing faculty professional development support for online classes and telepresence.

4. Provide year-round programming. This makes it faster to degree and the buildings and facilities are used year-round.

5. Create a Center for Continuing Education for the entire system with revenue sharing back to individual institutions.

6. With the consolidations to date, staff and faculty are stretched. When looking at areas of accessibility, and the future of programs, it is important to recognize this fact.

Governance

The Task Force spent time exploring accreditation and governance options. We did not reach any conclusions, but we recognized several important points:

❖ Different colleges in the system have different levels of symbiosis. Therefore, it is important to recognize the different needs of the institutions in all areas including governance.

❖ There are benefits and costs associated with centralized governance (Chancellor's Office). It is important to look at services and systems that can be improved and meet the needs of the colleges.

❖ The IT department (system-wide software, network costs, and staffing) is 5/8 of the budget for the OC. This is an area to explore and consider the overlap in staffing at this central office and at the colleges.

❖ Decisions by the OC and individual colleges can and should have better coordination and communication.

Duplication

1. Explore, single degree majors (programs) for like-programs across the system. Preserve options across the system, but not at all locations. Look at these programs individually, there is not one approach that fits all.

2. Create a single general education program.

3. Create a direct pathways (admissions) process for all associate degree programs. Create more 2+2 articulation agreements within the system. Also consider ease of transfer of CCV meta-majors.

4. Increase and enhance the number of online degree completion programs for all degrees (associate, bachelor, and masters level classes). Determine where this makes sense, not a one-size fits all solution.

5. Conduct an analysis of academic programs and consider areas for consolidation, specifically with NVU and CU.

6. Conduct an analysis of functional area duplication in non-academic areas such as: admissions/ recruitment, alumni relations, grants and contracts, large gifts, communication/PR, advising, student life, student housing/residential living, IT infrastructure, IT desktop / user support, instructional technology, libraries, financial aid, registrar/records and career services.

7. Other ideas for systems improvements and potential inefficiencies in duplication: create one military-connected certifying official, streamline electronic forms, align terminology of services and programs across the system.

Affordability

We have not discussed the topic of affordability fully, although it is a critical and core area. We will discuss this area and share ideas on 7/28.