

VSCS Forward Task Force Stakeholder Survey Results Summary

August 11, 2020

INTRO:

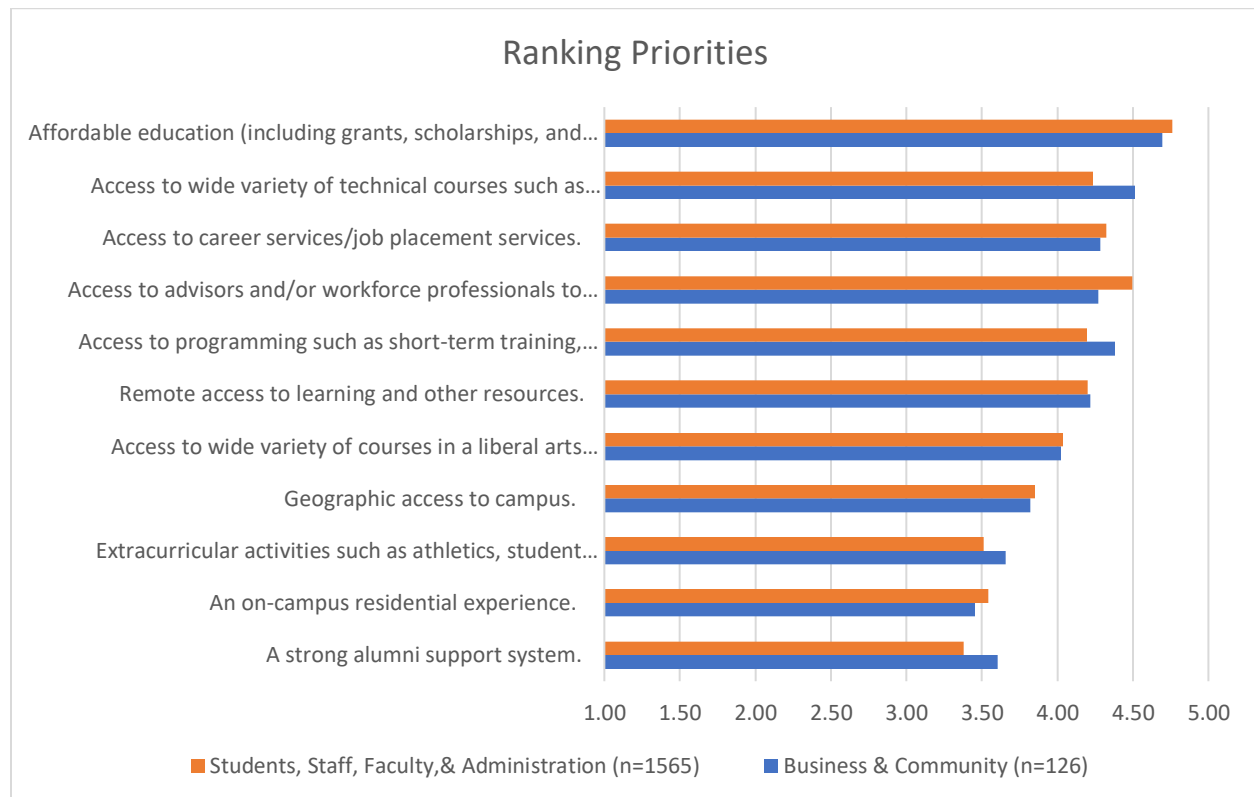
A survey invitation was sent to all VSCS internal stakeholders (students, faculty, administration, and staff), with targeted distribution to external stakeholders, including 400+ high school partners (dual enrollment, Early College, and VSAC Outreach) and 400+ employer/workforce development partners.

The survey generated robust participation with over 2400 responses in just over 5 days. This represents approximately 20,000 minutes contributed to providing the VSCS Forward Task Force with input on our system's priorities, strengths, and opportunities for the future.

The Task Force plans to make the survey results available to the board and legislature for those bodies to glean as many ideas, perspectives, and feedback as possible as they determine the future of VSCS.

Assessing Priorities with All Stakeholder Groups

There is strong general agreement among those within the system (Students, Staff, Faculty, and administrators) and those outside the system (employers, businesses, and community members) in the ranking of priorities for VSCS institutions. Among 11 priorities, the rankings are highly correlated ($r=0.879$, $p < 0.001$). **Both those within the system and stakeholders on the outside rank affordability as the number one priority.** While those inside the system rank "Access to advisors" as the second highest priority, those on the outside rank "Access to a wide variety of technical courses" second highest. Apart from this, most of the priorities are roughly shared, as illustrated in the following chart.



Workforce Preparation Perceptions

Stakeholders outside of the system are generally satisfied that the VSCS graduates students with skills for the workforce. Ninety-one percent of those who responded (n=132) are either “very satisfied” (45.5%) or “somewhat satisfied” (45.5%); six percent are somewhat dissatisfied, and 3 percent are very dissatisfied. When asked what knowledge or skills are missing from VSCS graduates, many stakeholders referenced a need for more hands-on experience and that students need to develop their communication skills. One respondent challenged the premise of the question, stating, “VSC is not a true system except in name – there is no consistency in anything amongst partners.”

School Counselor Perceptions

Thinking only of students who choose a VSCS institution - Why do students choose VSCS? What are those students looking for?

What are some of the reasons students do NOT choose a VSCS institution?

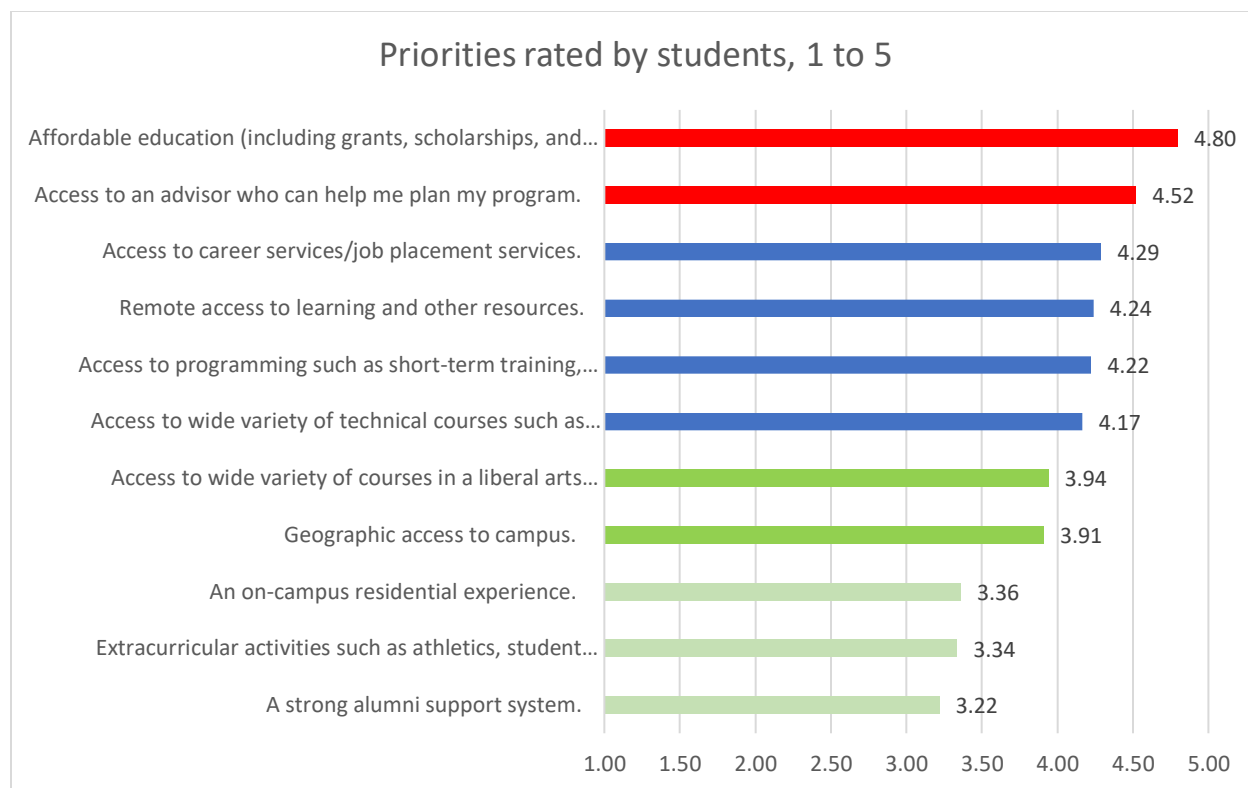
To these open-ended questions, school counselor responses consistently echoed affordability, proximity to home, and small, welcoming college communities as the primary reason students choose the VSCS. Conversely, students who don't choose the VSCS according to school counselors are looking for an experience that is more affordable, further from home, beyond Vermont, not rural, larger in size and breadth of programming, or more competitive academically.

VSCS Student Perceptions

PRIORITIES

The top priority for students is affordability. On a scale of one to five, the mean score for affordability from student respondents was 4.8. It is rated significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) than the second highest rated priority, “access to an advisor,” which was rated at 4.52. These top-rated priorities (in red below) are more important to students than the second tier of responses (in blue). In the second tier of priorities are access to career services, remote learning, short-term training, and technical courses.

The third tier of priorities (signified by green bars) are a variety of liberal arts courses and geographic access to campus. Finally, the least important priorities, of the 11 priorities we suggested, are the residential experience, extracurricular activities, and a strong alumni support system.



For many students, the primary concern is for developing specific skills sets as efficiently as possible. A second, but smaller group, seek a full residential college experience, with extra-curricular activities. Third and last, a smaller group is interested in a rounded, liberal arts education. The differences become clearer in the responses to the open-ended questions that follow.

STRENGTHS

We asked respondents, "When you think about the Vermont State College System and the schools associated with the system, what do you view as the distinguishing characteristics? What are the greatest strengths of the Vermont higher education system?"

Theme: Where everybody knows your name

The small college experience and the personal connection with instructors and staff is a common theme among student respondents. Community was also a central theme; students felt a personal connection to either faculty or to the broader community. (2097)

Access, generally, was a consistent theme in the "strengths" section, and references to online courses were plentiful, mostly in a positive way. (1679) Additionally, nearly as many students that cited access (n=72) cited affordability as a strength of the VSC schools (n=65). (883)

When I think about our Vermont colleges, I think of varied learning, easy access to colleges, geographic closeness, more affordable, easy for adult learners as well as students who need technical and every day normal degrees for the local work force.

Welcoming environment and an affordable higher education alternative to UVM.

Many students cited the high rate of job placements; this is clearly seen as a strength for these students. (592) Many students cited the cohesiveness of the VSC system; they applauded the ability to move from one institution to another and that the institutions work very well together. (650) (2280)

What I see as a strength to ALL Vermont State Colleges is their ability to provide quality education while promoting and benefitting from Vermont's landscapes. Vermonter's love And respect of nature is prevalent in the courses and faculty available, and stretches

A few of the hard truths from respondents focus on some of VSC's perceived shortcomings, from the students' perspective. While many students praised the quality of instruction across all institutions, one points out that the quality is not always consistent, and another respondent noted that online instruction is not always done well. Though found in the Strengths section, the following offered some criticism that we would do well to consider.

Strengths: affordability (CCV) Weaknesses: instructor training (particularly for online courses), consistency of experience (in online courses), tuition price (not actually that great a bargain at VtTech) Opportunities: Threats: Over-extension, uncompetitive instructor compensation leading to loss of competent instructor-base, not-my-problem attitude of cash-strapped elderly Vermonters towards education spending.

That it provides higher education to what would be an isolated geographic region. That said, from a student's perspective, there is a lot of work to be done in improving the quality of educational technique (not talking about technology): developing a culture of listening and engaging on the parts of students and faculty - not a forced "engagement activities" approach, but really looking for ways to revisit the basics of quality scholarship, teaching, and students who find the identity of student relevant and a priority to them.

The community/support established by the Vermont State Colleges. A lot of students have limited support (and are lacking faith in themselves), but through the community of our great schools they are surrounded by people who believe in them; students' inner strength grows, and they push their limits of what their future could be. CCV has taught me what selfless community truly means.

You're like every other college in this country. No VSC is special. I would say a very small percentage of VT State College students say, "Oh I'm going to (insert VT state college) because it's a great school". It is my belief that prospective students go to VT

State Colleges because they get in state tuition, their parents/siblings are alumni, or they like Vermont. The decision of picking a college is second to choose of geographic region selection. Undoubtedly, all VSC institutions are fine institutions, where you can change your life, change your path, and shape your future. But you can do that at any college worth a damn in any country in the world. When I think of VT colleges, I think of Vermont's beauty, I don't think of Castleton's football field or UVM's library. You can find those on any University Campus.

OPPORTUNITIES

We asked, "Given our current health and economic crisis, what ideas do you have for the Vermont State College System? Are there opportunities that make sense in this environment that perhaps were not there before or make more sense now?"

Theme: To Be Virtual or Not

The students tend to see the greatest opportunity presented today is the push to have more virtual instruction, although many students push back against online courses, and still many advocate hybrid courses to ease student access.

VSCS Administration, Faculty and Staff Priorities and Perspectives

PRIORITIES

The top priorities for Admin, Faculty and Staff in our survey are affordability and access. They view access as important across several factors, including to an advisor, remote learning, and career services and placement. This group was less focused on geographic access (campus), residential experiences, and alumni support system. Interestingly, faculty felt that access to a variety of liberal arts classes is a priority more than other groups that responded.

STRENGTHS

The common themes of Admin, Faculty and Staff in the survey comments for strengths was around an accessible education, a system with something for everyone. This groups feels that the diverse students, the ability to study at any age and many subjects made the state college system different than other higher education institutions in Vermont. First generation college students, students re-entering education, and those who work and go to school were some of the student groups mentioned.

This group also reported that the VSCS was a small, strong, tight knit community with a dedicated workforce. The size, scale and nature of the student and experience keep it personal. This group talked about life-long connections with students.

There were several comments about training students to be ready for the workforce and have a return on their investment. This group sees a connection between some of the strong programs and the demand for the schools (arts, meteorology, TV studies, nursing and other health fields and the trades). Half the students at Castleton participate in athletics and that came up with this group. The Admin,

Faculty and Staff see the institutions as valuable in their communities and feel that the small, rural towns as a higher education experience is differentiating for VSCS.

OPPORTUNITIES

There were many comments that focused on online delivery, rather than campus, residential experiences. This group saw that as one way to make education more affordable, improve accessibility and for differentiation.

Some of the specific ideas that came up: all students spend first two years at CCV, a shared General Education program for the entire state (also accessible online), focus on more early college students, elevating accelerated programs and pathways. There were some ideas for increasing partnerships with for-profits and non-profits for support and services and increase in short credential programs and online programs for associate's, bachelor's, and graduate degree programs.

The VSCS experience is about an opportunity for everyone. There were ideas that made this possible including day care at work, debt-free work college, having companies and start-ups on campus, programs for seniors, remote learning preparing students for remote jobs, return to work programs, and many graduate and certificate programs. Other ways to differentiate were to create programs that accelerated the higher education experience to three years, a center for the visual and performing arts, and non-profit/employer partnerships in areas such as economic development, social justice, mental health and other health services, and social justice and reform.

Broadband is critical and important to make many ideas work for students. This group felt that Vermont could/should figure out a way to support our Vermont students K-Higher Education - all the way through education system.

On the question of footprint, these groups mentioned downsizing, felt that some campuses are obsolete (especially give what they learned with COVID). They talked about moving functions to fewer campuses in some different ways.

Admin, Faculty and Staff pointed out that there is differentiation between different institutions, and they thought the best way forward is to remove overlapping programs. If the transfer is seamless the single institution becomes less critical. Many in this group wants to see VSCS invest in the strongest programs or needs (by reputation).

This group felt that VSCS should consider reducing or eliminating program overlap, low-enrolled programs/courses, athletics, Office of Chancellor (or decentralize, stop spending on IT solutions), Deans, and Presidents.