

A New Chapter for the Vermont State Colleges System

By Representative Lynn Dickinson

The Vermont State College System has embraced a revolutionary, system-wide transformation so we can continue serving our students, the Vermont economy, and the Vermont communities that host our vibrant rural campuses.

This is a big improvement from just last year when the pandemic hit, amplifying our budget challenges and forcing the VSCS to make an untenable decision: close campuses or face insolvency. State and college leaders rallied and we are now on the road to a unified school system that will be better for students and the demands of the Vermont workforce. We've frozen tuition, launched new scholarship opportunities, and thanks to support from state leaders, we are now on a solid enough financial footing that we can remove the prospect of campus closures while we trim administrative costs and grow revenue.

As the Chair of the Board of Trustees, my focus is on ensuring the VSCS is meeting the needs of Vermont learners and the state's workforce, supporting our great faculty and staff, and balancing the budget. I also want to be transparent about the changes ahead.

The road map for the VSCS transformation came from a special [Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education in Vermont](#) created by lawmakers last year. The Committee's three main recommendations, which the Board has endorsed, are:

- (1) Unify the three residential colleges: Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College into one institution while maintaining present campus locations as education and student support centers;
- (2) Pursue system-wide administrative consolidations to streamline functions, modernize, and better serve our students, employees, and host communities; and,
- (3) Aggressively increase the state's annual funding of the VSCS to \$48 million dollars over four years, with decreasing levels of one-time funding, coupled with a plan to reduce the VSCS's structural deficit by \$5 million per year over five years.

In response, the legislature and the Governor invested a [historic \\$88.9 million dollars](#) in the VSCS this year. Funding includes an increase to our regular base appropriation, bridge funding to help cover our structural budget deficit and grant us time to meaningfully transform, a dedicated fund to assist with transformation expenses, and over \$16 million dollars in additional student scholarships, free tuition opportunities, and workforce development initiatives for Vermont learners.

However, this much-needed investment came with a mandate from the state for meaningful, measurable transformation into a fully integrated and financially stable system. The mandate is clear: the VSCS exists for the benefit of Vermont so it must transform in order to survive and secure increased state college funding in the coming years.

We are working now to improve the class and program options for students. Led by faculty and academic leaders across the three unifying institutions, the goal is to keep, and enhance, the programs

that meet the modern demands of students and the state's workforce as we bring three institutions together into one, and to offer courses and programs that prepare students for the world of work and for participation in and enrichment of a democratic and civil society.

We will also be engaging stakeholders across the system to create the name and brand of the new, unified university and we are in the process of hiring a president for the new university.

To reduce operating costs, we are digging in to the hard work of serious, system-wide administrative consolidations. To succeed we must streamline services and reduce duplication of processes.

On July 1, 2023, the Vermont State Colleges System will consist of the new university and the Community College of Vermont. In the meantime, we will continue to provide the high-quality, personalized education our students expect and will work to make the transition as smooth as possible for our students, employees, and for Vermont.

Change is hard. The Board recognizes that, as does the state. That is why we are creating many opportunities for public engagement and stakeholder input as we craft the vision for the new system structure and the new institution. But change and innovation are needed to seize this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create the student-centered and future-oriented higher education system that expands access to education across the state while meeting the needs of our current and future learners, the state, and our financial stability.

With sustained ongoing investment from the state and the support of Vermonters, we will pioneer a new, transformed university and state higher education system, serving our students and Vermont into the future, while preserving our campuses as economic and community anchors in their rural communities across the state.

Representative Lynn Dickinson is Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Vermont State Colleges System, comprising the Community College of Vermont, Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College. She represents St. Albans Town in the Vermont Legislature and serves on the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development.