



*****MEDIA ALERT*****

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Cameron Russell
cameron@rebeccaholcombe.com

Rebecca Holcombe: The Future of the Vermont State College System

Vermont's strength is in our people and in their ability to innovate. Protecting this strength, in every county, depends on making sure all Vermonters—and especially those who are not wealthy or who have historically been disadvantaged—have the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge they need to contribute to our communities and economy, and to earn good wages that enable them to care for themselves and their families. Higher education and post-secondary credentials play a critical role in building the capabilities of our people and ensuring equity of opportunity.

The recent withdrawal of a proposal to close our rural state college campuses provides a temporary delay of action, but our rural counties and the working class Vermonters who make up the majority of their student population still need us to have their backs. Their communities are already struggling against inadequate broadband, constrained economic opportunities, and years of deferred maintenance on public infrastructure. They struggle to recruit primary care doctors and to provide any childcare for workers—forget about a choice. They feed us, and they depend on the colleges to provide their teachers, technicians, mechanics, and their farmers with the knowledge they need to best serve their communities and to support Vermont's statewide economy. They pay taxes too, and they need to know we won't slam the door of opportunity in their faces.

Make no mistake; our Vermont State College system plays a critical role in helping Vermonters move into good jobs that pay good wages, and in supporting economic prosperity and innovation. Vermont's students and communities need to know the state is committed to making sure they have a fair and affordable shot at opportunity.

That doesn't mean this will be easy.

The state faced acute and unaddressed fiscal challenges before COVID19, and those will make responding even more challenging. The current state college structure is poorly positioned to address the needs of today's Vermonters. Furthermore, how Vermont students

pursue advanced education has changed. Out of economic necessity, many attend part time or for intervals, to receive credentials that qualify them for more and better opportunities. This demands a more flexible approach to learning for many students.

No institution will—nor should—look the same in four years. While there is no bright future for the state that doesn't involve a robust college system, the last few days have made clear that pouring money into the system as it is currently configured is not an option.

It's time to think big, across sectors and across regions, about how we can work together to use every state dollar as carefully as we can to invest in the future well-being of our communities, and in particular, those for whom our current economy does not work.

We won't know the exact solution until the appropriate representative stakeholders have had a chance to engage, but the current fragmented system must be replaced with a unified system with reformed and streamlined administration, that is sized appropriately to meet needs, provides both education and technical training, and is flexible and nimble enough to meet the unique needs of its population, which is participating in education in different ways than previous generations.

I encourage the legislature to close estimated \$25 million gap in the VSC budget for this year. VSC should look for system-wide opportunities to share costs to blunt the impact of COVID19 pressures, but the state must support the current structure of the VSC until June 2021, to ensure students an orderly transition as well as proper prototype work to support robust transformation of the State Colleges, while maintaining its aspirational public purpose.

However, this funding must come with conditions. The legislature must demand a complete system redesign plan by January 1 of 2021 that addresses the following, among other considerations:

1. Inventory the total infrastructure of the combined state colleges, including both condition and any specialized nature or purpose of assets. This sets the table for informed and coordinated decisions about:
 - a. Bringing the total infrastructure of the system in line with demand, and allow for regional specialization
 - b. Opportunities to share critical infrastructure (e.g. with DOL or CTE partners) or to support entrepreneurial activities (e.g. incubators for entrepreneurs, “lab school” style childcares that meet critical needs while providing contexts for professional training)
2. Propose a unified system of governance that builds on and protects the operational model and success of CCV (including as a feeder for other college programs) and allows for gradual dissolution of the Chancellors office (an estimated \$8m savings) and streamlined coordination and planning for the new units.

3. Reconfigure the state college system to create coordinated programs of study and unified college and technical education opportunities at each site, Bring together capabilities for higher education, high school career pathways, career development, adult education and work force development under one roof, at scale, in each region. This combined education and workforce training system would offer programs specific to the needs and unique opportunities in each region of the state, and accommodate part-time, and full-time students through in-person, on-line, and hybrid degree, certificate, and credential programs that are coordinated with the regional CTE centers and adult CTE coordinators.

Benefits:

- Reduced duplicative administration
- Shared core capability related to academics
- Reformed governance to ensure system-wide strategic planning
- Enhanced access to technical opportunities in every region by leveraging existing assets through adult CTE in the regional CTE centers
- Shared costs of overhead
- Enhanced and focused dual and concurrent enrollment options for high school students
- Better support for adult education and literacy

Position sites as **Education and Economic Development Hubs.**

For example, NVU Lyndon could be a regional education and career development hub, under one coordinating entity, to use shared resources of K-12, CTE, the VT Talent Pipeline, college and DOL to offer state –of-the art career development, access to industry recognized credentials and post-secondary education in the NEK. This could be a regional economic development and training hub that focuses on sustainability of natural resources, agriculture, hospitality, and tourism (including outdoor recreation), agro-tourism, and manufacturing and construction trades). Local entities with deep roots and a valued tradition of serving their community, such as Lyndon Institute, could be invited become part of the hub. Each hub can include a working childcare / “lab school” on site, to meet community needs while advancing professional opportunities.

Benefits:

- Cost and facility sharing allows for better opportunities
- State of the art career development at a lower price
- Help to retain critical contributors to the local/regional economy – NVU-Lyndon and Lyndon Institute
- Opportunities to reinvest in the community through entrepreneurship (plumbers, electricians, farmers, et. are all self-employed unless they work for a business owner).

4. Require partnerships and grades 7-16 pathways between CCV and nearby CTE centers in every region. With tighter coordination of Dual Enrollment, Fast Forward and Early College, VT statute already provides funding for almost a year and a half of college for VT students. Pay for a cumulative total of two full years of college credits for students enrolled at Hubs.
5. Prioritize and educate students and families about high growth, high demand, high wage sectors that lead VT students into the middle class, for example:
 - Advanced manufacturing
 - Green energy technologies (everything from preparing people with smart-grid and green energy technologies, to replacing retiring workforce with workers certified to fix HVAC and Heating systems, but with an eye to climate and sustainability goals)
 - Local Food systems/Agriculture – support local food supply chains and processing to ensure food security and resilience, along with regenerative agricultural practices that address carbon goals
 - Health care workforce (from rheumatologists and diagnostic imaging, to nursing and PAs)
6. Recommend statutory change to ensure VSAC advancement grants are spent in state, unless a specific designated, high-need career credential or pathway is not available in state. In this case, out of state grants are allowed, provided the student returns to VT to work for a specified period of time. Evaluate pros and cons of requiring VSAC grants to all go for students in the state college and tech system.

To achieve an end result that ensures trust in and credibility of institutional leadership is restored and that equity of higher and technical education opportunity is demonstrated across all regions and of the state, it will be essential to ensure that the action-based committee tasked with formation and execution of this plan be made up of a diverse constituency of college presidents, union representation, members of the K-12 and Career and Technical Education (CTE) community, legislators, local businesses and community leaders, and students.

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