



To: Senate Education Committee
From: Carolyn Weir, Executive Director
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The McClure Foundation's Commitments to CCV

For the record, my name is Carolyn Weir and I am here on behalf of the McClure Foundation, where I serve as Executive Director. Thank you, Mr. Chair and the Committee, for inviting me to testify.

Thank you, too, for the range of recent meaningful investments in college and career training affordability. Vermonters' [astounding demand](#) for tuition-free offerings including the Critical Occupations Scholarships, free course incentives, and 802 Opportunity Grant reinforce that cost matters. We celebrate all the public and private investments in the affordability of college and career training during the pandemic and all they have made possible for students.

For the benefit of Committee members who may be unfamiliar with the McClure Foundation: we're a near-30-year affiliate of the Vermont Community Foundation that has spent the past fifteen years exclusively focused on supporting career pathways for Vermonters. We do that through grantmaking that strengthens Vermont's public college and career training systems and improves the accessibility and affordability of their programs. We recently pledged at least \$5 million in grants over five years toward that end, much of which is centered with CCV and the students they serve.

That is what my testimony centers on today: why CCV is our cornerstone partner, what we're doing to support CCV and its students, and what impacts and insights are being generated through our support that may be of interest to you.

By way of background: we zeroed in on our mission fifteen years ago because we were concerned about how few young people in Vermont were supported to choose college and career training directly after completing high school. You've all seen that data, which remains a leading indicator of future economic and workforce challenges. Two weeks ago, the New England Secondary Schools Consortium [released updated postsecondary continuation data](#). Both in the aggregate and disaggregated by gender, race, income status, and disability status, Vermont continues to have the lowest college continuation rates in New England. Fewer than half of all Vermont's high school graduates are transitioning directly to college.

We're committed to this work because we believe that affordable college and career training pathways delivered at scale is the single greatest lever for driving economic mobility and workforce development.

That belief points us toward a clear institutional partner: the Community College of Vermont.

Nationally, community colleges are engines of economic mobility – so too is CCV. CCV is Vermont's access institution: it has locations within 25 miles of 95% of Vermont residents and it enrolls the greatest number of Vermonters (and low-income Vermonters) of any college in the state. Becoming a CCV student is easy and so is transferring CCV credits.

If you're at all aware of our support for CCV, you're most likely to have heard of our two public pandemic-era commitments:

1. [Our graduation gift to the entire Vermont high school class of 2020 of one free course of their choosing at CCV](#), which doubled the enrollment of recent high school grads at CCV at a time when new enrollment at community colleges nationally plummeted by double digits. [What we learned from that initiative](#), layered onto a decade of lessons generated from supporting the meaningful and equitable implementation of the Flexible Pathways Bill, led to our second public commitment:
2. Last April, we announced [a promise to the Vermont high school classes of 2023-2026 of a free degree at CCV through the state's Early College program](#). As you know, the state's Early College program, part of the Flexible Pathways Bill (Act 77 of 2013), allows Vermont high school seniors to complete their last year of high school and their first year of college at the same time, earning free college credits that also count toward graduation from high school. Our promise builds on the state's Early College program by offering a second year of free college at CCV for Early College completers, giving students the chance to earn an associate degree the year after high school graduation. Our promise covers tuition and fees after federal and state financial aid; it also offers living stipends each semester and access to enhanced career and education advising. We made this promise because young people deserve guaranteed affordable pathways to education beyond high school – and need to be able to count on those pathways early enough to be prepared to succeed. I'm excited to share the early impacts of the Free Degree Promise through Early College, which is already changing enrollment patterns for the better and generating important lessons about how to design and support equitable student take-up and success in degree pathways.

It's worth noting that these two public commitments are complemented by over a decade of significant and ongoing grants to support CCV's capacity to serve students from diverse backgrounds. In recent years, those grants have supported CCV's education programs for middle and high school students, incarcerated education at Northern State Correctional Facility, enhanced services for veteran and military-connected students, and scaffolded career learning opportunities in alignment with the Guided Pathways framework for community college delivery. In all that work, CCV has proven to be an institutional partner that is responsive, creative, and ready to serve.

The remainder of my testimony will review the early impacts and insights associated with our Free Degree Promise through Early College as summarized in the enclosed fact sheet.

Thank you again for the invitation to testify today. The McClure Foundation is available as a resource and thought partner as you consider higher education and workforce development strategies. We've spent much of the past two years evaluating public and private investments and thinking about what lessons they can teach us.

The McClure Foundation **Free Degree Promise** offers the Vermont high school classes of 2023-2026 the opportunity to earn a **free associate degree** through the state's Early College program at the Community College of Vermont (CCV).

What is the Free Degree Promise?

A pathway to a free degree. The state's Early College program allows Vermont high school seniors to complete their last year of high school and their first year of college at the same time, earning free college credits that also count toward graduation from high school. The McClure Foundation's promise builds on the Early College program with a second year of free college at

CCV, giving students the chance to earn an associate degree the year after high school graduation. The Foundation's promise covers tuition and fees after federal and state financial aid, a living stipend, and career and education advising, putting students on a fast track to a debt-free degree and a promising Vermont job.

Why did the McClure Foundation make this promise?

HOPE

The pandemic response showed us that when college and career training is affordable, more Vermonters enroll. In a state like Vermont, with the lowest college continuation rates in New England, young people deserve to feel more hopeful about education after high school. That starts with affordability.

OPPORTUNITY

Community colleges are engines of economic mobility. With locations within 25 miles of 95% of Vermonters and

robust online offerings, CCV serves the greatest number of Vermonters of any college in the state.

VERMONT'S FUTURE

Fast-tracked pathways to affordable degrees are good for Vermonters - and good for Vermont. At a time when many promising Vermont jobs are waiting to be filled, the state's Early College program can lead to a free degree pathway that will benefit Vermont civically, socially, and economically.

Is it driving equitable access?

YES. The free degree program is already generating impact by inspiring hope among young people and leading to historic enrollment in CCV's Early College program, especially among low-income, first-generation, and BIPOC students from around the state. Read on to learn more.

*“To get those two years, and not be in debt,
and get farther...it opens a lot of doors and opportunities.”*

—OJ, Early College student at CCV



Early Impacts: Vermont's FREE DEGREE Promise

The Free Degree Promise drove the **largest Early College enrollment at CCV since the program began in 2014**. 198 students, 42 percent of whom are identified as low-income by their school counselor, are currently enrolled for 2022-23. This cohort represents 100 percent of Vermont's counties and 90 percent of Vermont's high schools. Early indicators are showing increased access, especially among historically marginalized populations, and that the majority of students intend to continue on to earn an associate degree.

- **30% increase in the percentage** of enrolled students from low-income families
- **39% of students are first-generation** (higher percentage than Vermont's overall K12 population)
- **16% of students are BIPOC** (higher percentage than Vermont's overall K12 population)
- **65% intend to continue at CCV toward their free associate degree** (more than double the typical percent of Early College completers who continue at CCV)

Two Stories of Student Success

Blake: His high school education interrupted by the pandemic, Blake attended classes online while working at the family's laundromat business. Ready to take his learning to the next level, Blake enrolled in Early College at the recommendation of one of his teachers at Williamstown High School. The opportunity to get a free degree **"drives me to get better grades,"** says Blake. **"I have more motivation."** Blake is pursuing an associate degree in business, after which he plans to become a licensed electrician and open his own business.

Faith: With aspirations of becoming the first person in her family to attend college, Faith prioritized her education and dreamed of earning a degree. Adopted and raised by her grandparents, however, she worried that her family wouldn't be able to afford it. When she learned about the Free Degree Promise, she signed up immediately. Currently enrolled in the first Promise cohort, Faith will earn an associate degree in business in 2023, one year after graduating high school, and is exploring careers in marketing. **"It is a gift that has changed my adult life,"** she said.

What's next?

The Foundation will continue to partner with CCV to support enrolled students, evaluate this promise model, and share what we learn along the way.

Three Factors Contributing to Early Success

1 A commitment to universal access

All students in the high school classes of 2023-2026 are eligible to apply and can choose any degree program offered by CCV. The Foundation believes every young person deserves dependable options for continuing their education and training. As a universal opportunity, this gift drives across-the-board enrollment by reducing the stigma of accessing supports among the students who stand to benefit most.

2 Support beyond tuition

In partnership with the Vermont Community Foundation, the McClure Foundation is providing living stipends and enhanced advising to students – and is directly resourcing CCV to market, administer, and evaluate the initiative.

3 Leveraging public funding

This promise builds on the state's Early College program, which has been helping students get a jumpstart on college pathways since 2014, and on recent public investments in the affordability of community college like the 802 Opportunity Grant.



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& LOIS MCCLURE
FOUNDATION

For more information on the McClure Foundation, visit mcclurevt.org or contact Executive Director Carolyn Weir at cweir@vermontcf.org or 802-388-3355 x239.