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Testimony for House Ed. Committee
February 28th, 2014

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us today. My name is Liz Beatty-Owens and I am a senior at Johnson State College enrolled in the interdisciplinary studies and small business management certification programs. I am also here as a representative of the Vermont Student Union. I have been struggling to make my way through the hefty fees that one acquires while enrolled at one of the Vermont State Colleges for the last 4 years. I have also watched my friends drop out year after year, many of them moving on to work in low-income jobs at restaurants and ski resorts while they pay off the debt they acquired at Johnson State, putting their lives on hold and restricting their opportunities. For a long time I solely blamed my school for not being more responsible or budgeting correctly- but then my peers and I started to dig deeper and realized that in fact the State of Vermont had drastically cut their funding levels and support systems to the Vermont State Colleges. We learned that it was so drastic that in fact our faculty and staff had been actively lobbying and concerned about this issue for many years.

How I see it is college students are remarkably easy to not notice. My story- I work two part time jobs while enrolled full time in school- this adds up to approximately a 75 hour work week- and so making my way to the state house to visit with you all is not particularly easy to do. Not to mention the \$500 dollars a month that I have to pay currently on top of the \$40,000 dollars worth of loans I will have to pay off starting this fall.

The higher education system in Vermont is increasingly becoming an elitist system, making it harder and harder for low-income, first-generation and disabled students to continue their education past high school. Over the last thirty years the amount of funding that the State has cut from the Vermont State Colleges is shameful. Year after year I hear Vermont politicians talk about the lack of job creation or our "aging state" or drug addiction- and every year the state follows through with band-aid legislation and wonders why not much has improved. Might I suggest that education is an excellent route. Affordable, accessible and state funded would be a good start. We are currently a state that funds our prison systems more than we fund our higher education system, and priorities like that are perhaps the route of our problem.

I am here today to ask you to please push S.40 through. Many of the Representatives I have asked have not been able to explain to me why this bill got sent back to committee. I myself am baffled as to why a study bill that is so important to so many young Vermonters and their families is still just sitting here.

This last week the VSC Board of Trustees voted yet again to increase tuition by 3% for in-state students. To some that might just look like another \$300-400 dollars a year tacked on to our loans. To me that increase is the next 20 years of debt payments, increasing every month with interest. That increase is my ability to own a home, buy a car, start a family or invest in my own business. That increase is the difference between college debt with a degree and college debt without a degree for at least three college students that I know.

Continuing to ignore the Vermont State Colleges and grossly under-fund the system is simply unsustainable and will only continue to drive young adults out of this state where education is cheaper and they are then able to create their own opportunity -or- where a graduate can find a job that allows them to pay off their ridiculous college debt. Please realize that the state not following through on their promise to fund the Vermont State Colleges in whole or substantial part is hurting thousands of students across our state and hindering their success. Please realize that we may not be in the state house lobbying every day, but that is simply because we have a few other responsibilities on our plate- and the decisions you make here -or don't- impact us directly. Please meet us halfway and Pass S.40.
Thank you.