

The Importance of State Funding for Public Higher Education in Vermont

I am here to support Chancellor Spaulding's request for a \$4 million increase to the Vermont State College System with an annual inflator. Currently Vermont ranks 49th in the nation in state support for public higher education. Less than 16% of the Vermont State College revenue comes from the state while more than 84% comes from student tuition. This represents a significant decline in state support of public higher education since 1980. In 1980, state appropriations covered 51% of the costs of the VSC, while they currently pay for 13% of the costs. This means that the burden of higher education costs has been transferred to tuition which has continued to rise and it also means that Vermont students graduate with greater student loan debt.

I am the Director of the Wellness Center at Castleton and I am the only licensed counselor employed by the University. The needs of students enrolled in higher education nationally has been rising at a much higher rate than the ability to meet those needs. The Center for College Mental Health at Penn State University indicated in their 2015 annual report that in the past 5 years, the rate of increase in the numbers of students seeking counseling services at institutions of higher education is more than 5 times the increase in institutional enrollment and that college counseling centers are struggling to meet the needs of students in distress. Castleton has seen that trend, with a 96% increase in students seeking counseling support (132 students received counseling in 2010/11, while 260 students received counseling in 2014/15 and 268 students in 2015/16).

Times have changed and students are not simply needing support for homesickness; they are arriving at college with significant mental health needs. Of the students seen in our counseling center this year, 38% have seriously considered committing suicide and 40% have intentionally hurt themselves without suicidal intent. 75% of students receiving counseling at our center indicate that their counseling helped them to remain in college. In the Fall of 2016 the Castleton Polling Institute conducted a health survey of Castleton students. In the results of that survey, 75% of Castleton students said that they had been bothered by overwhelming stress at least several days in the past two weeks. Our institution does not have the funds to hire more full time counseling staff. We have attempted to meet the significant increase in requests for counseling by having unpaid graduate interns provide counseling and by donating office space to two private practice clinicians. We also offer stress clinics, teach students to look out for one another through a 7-week training program called the Student Support Network, and one of my staff members provides advocacy, education, and prevention services related to sexual assault and relationship violence and advises a peer advocate student group called Peer Advocates for Change which also provides these services.

The State of Vermont needs to support our students, all of our students, seeking to receive a degree at our State College system. I urge you to support representative Hill's bill H122.

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