

Testimony: Senate Education Committee, S. 257
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Thank you.

Many members of the VSCS Board of Trustees strongly believe that the Legislature or the VSAC board should revisit the policy of portability. It is not, however, a focus of our legislative agenda this year. Our focus remains affordability, access, and quality educational opportunities for our students. I would like to discuss portability in the context of that focus.

For so many years, the VT State Grant has supported tens of thousands of Vermont students who aspire to further their educations. In many cases, the grant has made the difference in a decision about whether or not students can and will go to college, or can and will complete their degrees. Not only is the financial support significant in increasing college-going by Vermonters, but grantees have ready access to the support of VSAC counselors who humanize the financial aid bureaucracy.

The state grant has been Vermont's answer to college affordability. It was, in part, an antidote to low state support for public higher ed institutions. Over time, with low appropriations to UVM and the Vermont State Colleges, the pressure on our tuition rates has only grown, and the grant has not kept pace. The gap between costs and many Vermonters' ability to pay is widening.

While the VT State Colleges remain among the most affordable choices in Vermont, there is another side of the coin. [VSCS Impact 2016-2017: Average Annual Cost and Typical Total Debt After Graduation](#)

Thankfully, many of the students at the VSCS receive the Vermont State Grant from VSAC. So why do our students graduate with so much debt if they are paying lower rates and receive the grant?

- Even with a Pell Grant and a VSAC grant, there is a gap in costs and ability to pay for many students.
- A majority of our students come from low-income families. Often, they borrow every dollar not covered by aid – at the high interest rates charged for student loans.
- The VSCS does not have large pools of financial aid to distribute to students.

We know there are powerful links between affordability and college continuation, college completion, student debt, and the financial sustainability of your public higher education institutions.

So in any question you might pose about state funding for higher education programs, I would ask: is Vermont spending its limited public higher education dollars in ways that help it reach its goals as a state?

What are Vermont's goals for public higher education? Are they...

- To increase the number of first generation, low-income students attending and completing college?
- To encourage young people to stay in Vermont and build our communities and workforce?
- To support access to high-quality, affordable post-secondary educational institutions in different regions of the state?
- To emphasize individual success or the public good?

Any conversation about portability should take place within the context of state goals. This is the approach other states are taking.

- The State of Connecticut ended the portability of its state grant to encourage their goal of in-state college going.
- The State of New York is offering full scholarships to New York residents to encourage them to attend their public institutions and stay and work in New York, two state goals.
- Indiana, to reach their 60X2025 goal, now provides grants to help residents complete degrees at in-state public colleges and universities.

Could Vermont keep VSAC grant funds in state and change the funding formula in a way that will help close the cost gap for students attending Vermont institutions?

Even with restricted portability, Vermont students would still have access to specialized programs of study at public colleges in New England that our colleges do not offer. The New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) Regional Student Program Tuition Break (RSP) program provides substantial tuition discounts for hundreds of VT student attending college elsewhere in New England.

I want to dispel the notion that going to college in state means a student is “stuck in Vermont” and that somehow their experience is *less*. Hundreds of our students take advantage of VSCS out-of-state or out-of-country learning opportunities. Whether it is a Castleton University faculty-led course in Cuba on Cuban history, and culture, a year at one of 200 partner colleges around the country through the National Student Exchange at Northern Vermont University, or study abroad from any of our five colleges, students enthusiastically participate in learning opportunities out-of-state.

The Vermont State Colleges System believes our goals align with Vermont, and we encourage VSAC and the Legislature to reconsider the portability – and all higher education policies -- in light of your goals.