

Why Public Higher Education is an Investment for the Future of ALL of US

My name is Morna Flaum and I am here to testify on behalf of AFT Vermont. I like to share our priorities with you and request your support.

AFT Vermont continues to seek union elections that are fair and free from employer intimidation for the majority of Licensed Nursing Assistants (LNAs) at the University of Vermont Medical Center who are organizing a union to negotiate for quality care and respect.

Unions are the best way to ensure real employee input to make our Vermont institutions the best they can be, and the best way to ensure livable wage jobs. In fact, part-time faculty at CCV are also organizing to join our union.

On the issue of jobs that pay a livable wage, AFT Vermont fully supports the appropriation for the Designated Agencies that will raise the minimum wage for front line mental health workers to \$15 per hour. The Union further advocates a real investment in preventative care in order to reduce hospitalization and save significant health care dollars, while providing more appropriate treatment for those with mental health care needs. We believe this step is an important step in raising the minimum wage for all Vermonters to \$15 per hour.

We are opposed to bill [H.41](#) that would remove the authority of the legislature to elect trustees at the University of Vermont. We support the current structure of legislative trustees. They are accessible to faculty, staff, student, and Vermont citizens. The system is not in need of restructuring.

We urge you to support funding for the VSC by \$4 million with an annual inflator. Public higher education has become increasingly unaffordable in Vermont. According to Vermont State Colleges (VSC) data, state support for higher education has steadily declined in the past 34 years. In 1980 state appropriations provided 51% of VSC revenue while 49% came from student tuition. Today less than 16% of the VSC revenue comes from the state while more than 84% comes from student tuition.

I want you let that sink in. 84% of a vast network of institutions and their manifold expenses are paid by fledglings just out of the nest! Vermont students pay 84 cents of every dollar that our state owned colleges need to keep the lights on, to scrub the toilets, to mow the extensive lawns, to pay the Chancellor, the Trustees, the Administration, the Faculty, and the Staff. But the vast majority of our students BORROW money to pay most or all of their tuition, which means they promising to pay 84 cents of every dollar plus interest for decades to come. For decades to come, students will be burdened with debt for having funded the state college system.

I teach at the Northern University of Vermont, Johnson campus. Since 2009 I have spoken with countless students who work two to three jobs while struggling to maintain their grades. Often the stress of their mounting student debt combined with the stress of working so hard and struggling with their coursework, causes students to drop out of higher education, often mid-semester. In every semester I have taught at VSC I lose about 10% of my students to this vicious cycle. It is a double tragedy; they will still be carrying student debt, but they won't

have a degree, and they won't be able to find a job that will pay them enough to afford their student loan payment. But still worse, they will feel that they failed. They will be scarred by having tried so hard for an education without completing it. They will remember education as being overwhelmingly stressful and expensive, and very likely they will feel a deep and lasting shame from that experience. But it is NOT their failure. That shame, that failure, that loss, should be felt by ALL OF US who have allowed such unmanageable expenses to fall on the shoulders of young people who are new to the world of finance and work, suitable only for jobs with the lowest wages and most onerous conditions, new to the needs of supporting themselves, and vulnerable to the many fears and unknowns of financial responsibilities.

In the most recent State Higher Education Officers (SHEEO) data, Vermont currently ranks last in state and local support per full time equivalent student and also has the highest level of family share contribution for higher education. Vermont is not unique in this respect; state disinvestment in higher education has become a national trend. The College Board reports that from 2008 to 2013, total state appropriations declined 19% while full-time enrollment increased 11%. Vermont may not be unique but the process started more than a decade earlier than in most states and the decline in state support has been more significant here.

This funding model is unsustainable. For more than twenty years VSC has consistently gone to the Board of Trustees for increases in student tuition in order to maintain quality education rather than ask the State to do the hard work of redressing the balance of funding.

This dramatic decrease in state funding is largely responsible for a substantial increase in tuition and student loan debt after graduation. According to The College Board, Vermont currently has the second highest tuition in the country – only New Hampshire has a higher average tuition. These increases have also happened at a time when income has remained relatively stagnant.

This high tuition means that Vermont students graduate with an average of just under \$29,000 in student debt.- The New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE) recommends that no more than 15% of a person's income should go to paying student loan debt. In Vermont, an average of 21% of income goes to paying off student loan debt – the largest percentage in New England.

We are at a cross-roads. We can no longer support the VSC on the backs of our Vermont students and we can't continue to maintain high quality education without funding. Because the state of Vermont has not supported public higher education, we are insuring that more of our low income – and even middle income – students will not be able to afford college. Only 40% of Vermonters have some post-secondary education. I cannot help but think that this is due to the lack of affordability in higher education.

At a time when some form of post high school education is necessary for financial success and stability, affordable public higher education is more important than ever. People

with a four year degree have a higher life-time earning potential. They are also more likely to have better health and retirement benefits and are less likely to face unemployment.

Another reason we should encourage our legislature to support public higher education: the health and well-being of our state depends on it. In 1961, the VSC was established with enacting legislation that promised to support the VSC: “in whole or substantial part.” We are asking the state to honor that promise, because an investment in public higher education is an investment in Vermont.

84% of our graduates stay, work and raise their families in Vermont. Our graduates are teachers, social workers, farmers and small business owners *in Vermont*. They get married, buy houses, and have the resources to raise their own children so that someday they too will be ready for higher education and prepared to carry on the work of being productive adults in an increasingly complex society. I cannot go anywhere in the state without running into a VSC graduate. I would not like to see this change. Last year the VSC graduated 2043 students. It’s also exciting to note, according the data from the VSC, that the overwhelming majority of our graduates, 100% for example from 2015 graduates, were employed or going on to graduate school within 6 months of graduating. We are so proud that our students are prepared for the future. Let’s not hinder their abilities to be successful by saddling them with debt. Please support the increased funding for the VSC.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak.

Morna Flaum

Vice President Vermont State College Faculty Federation