

Notes from NEBHE

Key consideration: Blue-Ribbon Commission vs. consultant?

- Even when they draw upon inclusive input, consultant-led processes run the risk of becoming “shelf documents”
- There could also be a risk of the report being seen as the legislature’s view, rather than a shared agenda of all key stakeholders
- It’s critical and important to seize the mandate/opportunity for an action plan
- A select or blue ribbon commission that is inclusive (including the governor, the institutions, faculty, the VSC board, industry, economic development, etc.) may have a better chance at being seen as an authoritative voice whose recommendations have credibility.
- A consultant can support and facilitate the work and recommendations of the select committee

The committee can be charged with reporting to the governor and legislature (special session?)

Draft Proposal

Statement of Purpose

Vermont, like its neighboring New England states, is grappling with undeniable forces that put pressure on higher education’s ability to provide high quality, affordable and workforce-connected education and training programs:

- With a shrinking pool of high school graduates (projected to decline by 15% by 2032), enrollment of traditional age postsecondary education students may fall by 25% within the same time period.
- State support for higher education has not caught up to its pre-Great Recession levels, such that Vermont’s public higher education institutions rely on tuition and fees, which are among the highest in the country.
- COVID-19 has accelerated the demand for innovative delivery and design of postsecondary credentials. As learners’ preferences for education and training change, so must the providers of those opportunities. The capacity to innovate relies on strong support from governance bodies and Boards of Trustees, as well as flexible funding and business models.

Public postsecondary education is essential to the talent, innovation and growth the Vermont economy requires. Current challenges—fiscal, demographic, public health and others—reveal the necessity of re-envisioning our system of higher education to increase affordability, access, attainment and fiscal sustainability.

The Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education in Vermont (Select Committee) is an inclusive, legislature-supported effort to create a formal action plan to drive change and innovation in the state’s public postsecondary institutions. Its objectives include:

- Thoroughly analyze the issues, challenges and opportunities facing Vermont’s postsecondary institutions
- Re-envision the nature and roles of systems and institutions and expand integration and collaboration
- Support innovative and sustainable models to expand affordable, learner-centered, workforce-aligned credentials and degrees
- Re-envision the state’s postsecondary institutions and infrastructure as the primary platform for talent, innovation, entrepreneurship, workforce and more—and as primary “anchors” in cities and towns

- Create an action plan and clear commitments to investment, execution and outcomes

Proposed Composition of the Select Committee

The Select Committee seeks to engage a broad and representative group of stakeholders whose interests and expertise can inform a comprehensive action plan for public higher education in the state. Proposed members include:

- 3 representatives appointed by the governor (to include the governor and/or his designees, preferably respected private citizens representing the broad interests of the state)
- 6 representatives appointed by Vermont General Assembly (three appointed by the Senate President Pro Tempore and three appointed by the Speaker of the House)
- 2 representatives of the Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees
- The Interim Chancellor of Chancellor of the Vermont State Colleges System
- The president (or interim) of each Vermont State Colleges System institution
- 1 faculty and 1 staff member of each Vermont State Colleges System institution
- 2 representatives of the University of Vermont (President and member of the Board of Trustees)
- State Secretary of Education
- 1 representative of the Agency of Commerce and Community Development
- 1 representative of the Department of Labor or State Workforce Development Board
- 6 representatives of business and industry (nominated by the Vermont Chamber of Commerce)
- Representatives from specific cities, towns or regions?
- Heads of critical Vermont organizations (Charitable Foundation, Advance Vermont, and Vermont Talent Pipeline Management, and others)
- Ex-Officio, non-voting members? Governor? Speaker? Senate President Pro Tempore? Lieutenant Governor?

A steering committee composed of 5-8 members of the Select Committee will provide leadership to the Select Committee and hold additional responsibilities described below. Additional sub-committees may be formed to address key topic areas in greater depth.

Roles & Responsibilities

With support from the General Assembly, the Select Committee will be charged with:

- Hiring and overseeing the work of the consultant (detailed below)
- Setting a timeline for the key deliverables of the Select Committee, such as draft, interim and final reports
- Guiding a phased approach for taking up key topic areas, as needed
- Defining the scope of the formal action plan based on recommendations of the Select Committee and findings of the consultant
- Promoting the efforts of the Select Committee and the recommendations advanced in the formal action plan

The consultant, which will be hired through an RFP issued by the steering committee, will complete deliverables including but not limited to:

- Fiscal analysis related to the public higher education system and its constituent institutions
- Analysis of institutional performance metrics such as graduation rates, transfer and retention rates, number of degrees awarded by field of study, number of first-generation college students who receive degrees, distribution of family income of students, etc.
- Recommendations related to mitigating cost drivers, implementing new governance models, use of institution's physical assets and residential buildings and other topics delineated below

- Evaluation of program offerings and alignment with Vermont's current and forecasted labor market needs

Project management capacity will be offered by the New England Board of Higher Education (NEBHE). Specifically, NEBHE will oversee:

- The execution of the timeline set by the steering committee
- Scheduling and managing meetings of the Select, steering, and any sub-committees and curation of supporting documents
- Accurately capturing and disseminating meeting minutes and public comments
- Liaising with the consultant and Select Committee, as needed
- Assisting with drafting and finalizing the final report, as needed

Areas of Focus

The Select Committee and the resulting formal action plan will interrogate a number of topics related to the future of higher education in Vermont. Recognizing the need for short term solutions on system structure/governance, funding and sustainability, the Select Committee, through its steering committee, may consider a phased approach with intermediary deliverables related to draft and/or interim reports.

Focus Area 1: Investigate the financial sustainability of the public higher education and its impact on institutional capacity to innovate and meet state goals and learners' needs, such as:

- The governance structures, business models and funding sources of the University of Vermont and the Vermont State Colleges, in the context of Vermont's demographic and economic situation
- The costs and benefits of the current system vs. a statewide integrated system vs. an administrative confederation, contextualized by other states' efforts to consolidate and merge governance systems and/or institutions
- Institutional performance as measured by graduation rates, transfer and retention rates, number of degrees awarded by field of study, number of first-generation college students who receive degrees, distribution of family income of students
- The nature of the educational need in the northeast quadrant, the northwest quadrant, and the balance of the state by asking how to best serve students, employers and communities
- The delivery mechanisms employed by institutions, including residential or distance learning or a combination of the two, especially given the rural nature of our state
- The role of institutional specialization and identity in serving the needs of their communities, Vermonters and the economy
- The effectiveness of existing institutions for educational purposes and opportunities for new cost-savings and repurposing institutions to meet community needs.

Focus Area 2: Evaluate how the current structure of public higher education promotes student success, with particular focus on:

- Access to and completion of affordable postsecondary credentials (including badges and other micro-credentials, certificates, licenses and degrees).
 - Considering state support for higher education, tuition and fee rates, need-based grants
- Equitable opportunities and supports for all Vermonters, especially low-income, first-generation students, geographically-isolated individuals and adult learners.
- Existing and prospective student populations' preferences and need for higher education on topics including program duration, modality and cost.

- Connections to Vermont’s unique economy and pathways to good jobs for individuals experiencing job loss or reduced income due to COVID-19.

Focus Area 3: Consider the alignment of higher education and workforce development goals, policy frameworks and collaboratives including:

- [Act 189 of 2018](#), which charges the State Workforce Development Board to review, approve and publicize State-endorsed career pathways that improves employment outcomes, meets employers’ and workers’ needs and increases students’ ability to gain credentials of value, dual enrollment credits and postsecondary credentials or degrees.
- Vermont’s attainment goal, set in statute in [Act 80 of 2019](#), that 70% of working-age Vermonters will hold a credential of value, as defined by the State Workforce Development Board, by 2025.
- State Workforce Development Board, Vermont Talent Management Project and Advance Vermont.

Focus Area 4: Assess the alignment of higher education programs and outcomes to Vermont’s economy and promoting the public value of higher education, including:

- Identifying the type and field of degrees/programs offered by each institution (certificates/associates/baccalaureate/masters) to achieve the stated intent of this section
- The current and future needs of Vermont’s employers and its workforce, harvested from traditional and real-time sources of labor market data, as well as qualitative assessments of need
- Institutional ability to employ instructional models that recognize learners’ prior work and life experiences, such as prior learning assessment and competency-based education, to accelerate completion of in-demand postsecondary credentials
- Economic incentives provided to businesses in Vermont and see if or how they might be appropriately used to support higher education-employer partnerships, upskilling and reskilling initiatives and education benefits for workers

A potential phased approach may be pursued as follows:

- Phase I (July 15, 2020 - January 15, 2021)
 - Consideration of Focus Area 1
 - Interim report due to the Legislature on January 15, 2021
- Phase 2 (January 15, 2021 - June 15, 2021)
 - Consideration of Focus Areas 2 & 3
 - Interim report due to the Legislature on June 15, 2021
- Phase 3 (June 15, 2021-December 15, 2021)
 - Consideration of Focus Area 4
 - Drafting of Formal Action Plan
 - Formal Action Plan due to Legislature on December 15, 2021

Recommendations of the Select Committee and Its Formal Action Plan

The Select Committee’s formal action plan report shall include specific recommendations related to:

- System redesign: structure, cost savings, academic and administrative efficiencies and system-level capacity and roles
- Governance: governance effectiveness, strategic planning, roles for the VSC board, resource allocation

- Academic innovation: credential innovation, institutional mission refocusing, specialization and differentiation, program growth/reduction, regional needs labor market alignment, expansion to meet broader range of learners
- Integration: inter-institution collaboration, alignment and collaboration with the University of Vermont, public higher education infrastructure as platforms/hubs for talent, innovation, workforce and other
- Residential campus sustainability: plan for the future viability of small residential campuses
- Resources and funding: funding adequacy plan, strategic investment framework, performance-based funding model

The Select Committee and its consultant shall submit the first of its reports no later than January 15, 2021 to the Joint Fiscal Office. The Joint Fiscal Office shall forward the report to House and Senate Education, House Commerce and Economic Development, House and Senate Appropriations, and Senate Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs.