

FY21 Budget Testimony
August 27, 2020

Unfortunately, Vermont currently underfunds its public colleges and universities, resulting in inadequate resources for instruction and academic support, and it also means our public institutions rely too much on tuition dollars. Vermont has not always neglected higher education, but state support has consistently been reduced since 1980. In 1980, state appropriations covered 51% of the costs of the Vermont State College System (VSCS).

Currently, Vermonters who attend public institutions in-state pay one of the highest tuitions in the country and graduate with more debt. The VSCS primarily serves Vermont students. We would serve even more Vermonters if the state made tuition more affordable. Students who go to college in Vermont are more likely to stay in Vermont to live and work. In fact, 83% of the students in the VSCS are Vermonters, and 84% of our students stay and work in Vermont after graduation. Most importantly, 57% of our students are first generation college students. The ability for this population to attend college in their own state is vital. Governor Scott wants to keep younger Vermonters in the state as well as attract young working families to the state. Young families looking to move to Vermont are likely going to look at the availability of affordable quality higher education. Supporting the VSCS fits right in with the Governor's plan.

I urge the Legislature and Governor to support the VSCS with the FY21 bridge funding of \$36 million we need to keep operating for one more year, which will allow us time to articulate a viable plan for a sustainable system. Because of the decades-long disinvestment in the Vermont State Colleges, I am also asking for an ongoing commitment of support as well. Please make a commitment to increase appropriations so that we reach the regional average of state appropriations of 35%. We are currently at only 17.5% and rank 49th in country. The state of Vermont must increase funding for higher education if we want to continue to provide Vermonters with access to affordable quality higher education. Another way to reduce Vermont students' debt burden is to work towards free tuition for all Vermonters at all VSCS colleges and universities. Providing increase support for the VSCS could work towards this goal.

Since the majority of our students stay and work in Vermont after graduation, an investment in public higher education is an investment in Vermont. An investment in Vermont students truly is an investment in the future well-being of our state. Investing in the VSCS is good for Vermont's economy and for its workforce. The return on investment is enormous. NVU alone turns a state investment of \$11 million into \$113 million that goes back into our local communities every year. VSCS students become our teachers, nurses, small business owners, and more.

Additionally, in the time of COVID-19, the VSCS can and should be part of the path towards restoring and growing our economy. The VSCS already serves the public good; that is our mission. With support from the state we will have the ability to expand this mission and help in the recovery from this pandemic and after. We could expand programs needed in Vermont such as nursing, public health, mental health providers, contractors, early childhood educators. With more support we could make the colleges affordable to Vermonters just out of high school or those who want to go back to college to improve their skills and economic standing.

Now more than ever, the state cannot afford not to invest in the VSCS. Thank you.

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