

Free College Tuition is an Investment in Vermont

Budget Hearing Testimony

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Vermont currently ranks 50th of 50 states in terms of state support for public higher education. For 39 years the state has neglected public higher education with dwindling support. In 1980, state appropriations covered 51% of our budget for the Vermont State College System, now it covers a paltry 14%. The remaining 86% of tuition costs falls almost entirely on students and their families which places a significant financial burden on Vermont families. Our students pay one of the highest tuitions in the country and graduate with more debt. In Vermont we have one of the highest high school graduation rates in the country, but 40% of our students don't go on for post-secondary education. I can't help but think a significant reason for this is the cost of college in Vermont. It is also impossible to maintain high quality education in light of dwindling resources. When the VSC was created in 1961 the enacting language promised that the state would support us "in whole or substantial part". The state has not honored that promise and for the well-being of Vermont it is important that they do.

I would like to speak to the impact of this neglect by the state to the VSCS. The lack of state support has meant that we live a pretty precarious existence where any changes can result in difficulties. System wide we have seen an almost 25% reduction in full time faculty since 2014. The unification of Johnson and Lyndon as well as the cuts at Castleton in staff has resulted in much more significant workload issues for our staff. At Castleton, for example, in the past year 38 people have either retired (to save the jobs of others), had a reduction in their work to 80%

(resulting in a reduction in pay but not really a reduction in their jobs) or have been laid off. Many of these folks have served Castleton and our students for decades. Not supporting public higher education is short sighted and detrimental to the well-being of the state. We are seeing communities losing colleges in Vermont and when this happens it impacts not just the faculty, staff and students but the community and the state as well.

We need only to look at Poultney Vermont to see this. When a town of 4,000 residents loses 676 students it makes a difference. While we have yet to see the full impact, we do know that the Food Co-op in town announced its closure and that a new restaurant slated to open in mid-December remains closed. Empty storefronts is one way to measure the loss of a college, but a less tangible way, but perhaps more profound, is the loss of community. At GMC I think of the students who worked the college farm and sold CSAs to residents all summer long. In Castleton, where I have taught for 24 years, it is difficult to imagine what the loss of that college would mean to the community. No art class, hydrofit or yoga classes for the community. No scamp camp, public lectures or performances. Most importantly, no alums who would graduate and put down roots and raise their families in Vermont. The state legislature does not have control over the private colleges that are suffering in Vermont, but it does have the ability to change things in the public colleges. The legislature has the ability to see investment in public higher education as what is, an investment in the future of Vermont.

Governor Scott has proposed a 3 million dollar increase in support to the VSCS and Chancellor Spaulding has asked for a 5 million dollar increase each year for the next 5 years. I certainly support these increases, but I fear this is a band-aid where a tourniquet is necessary. We need sustained funds to support the public colleges and universities and we need this not just to sustain the VSCS or UVM, but we need it to support our students and our state.

In Governor Scott's state of the state address last year, he discussed the fact that Vermont has an aging population and for the health and survival of Vermont it is critical to attract and keep young people to live and work in Vermont. We couldn't agree more and believe that free college tuition to the Vermont State Colleges and the University of Vermont for all Vermonters will enable us to do this. Providing free tuition would benefit Vermont in a number of ways:

1. When students stay in Vermont for college, they are more likely to stay after graduation.
2. Free tuition might encourage the 40% of our students who don't go on to college to do so.
3. Free tuition would mean our Vermont students would be graduating with less debt, meaning they would be able buy homes and settle in communities more quickly.
4. If these young folks stayed in Vermont and worked and raised their families here, this investment in public higher education would be an investment in Vermont's future.

I appreciate your time.