

Heather Riemer, AFT Vermont S.38 Testimony 2/15/19

My name is Heather Riemer, I'm the Director of AFT Vermont and live in Burlington.

AFT Vermont represents 5000 healthcare and higher education professionals in Vermont in every county in Vermont. On the higher education side we represent

- The Full and Part-time Faculty at the University of Vermont
- The Faculty (who are all part-time) at the Community Colleges of Vermont
- The Full and Part-time Faculty, and the Professional, Technical and Supervisory Staff at Castleton University, Northern Vermont University (Johnson & Lyndon campuses) and Vermont Technical College.

The previous testimony has highlighted the benefits of passing S.38

- Attracting families to move to Vermont
- Encouraging Vermont High School graduates to remain in Vermont
- Decreasing the debt of college and university students

But I'd like to add another:

There has been a lot of focus on declining population and declining economic opportunity, particularly outside of Chittenden County. S.38

CCV has a campus in almost every county in the state, and the VSC campuses are located in Rutland, Lamoille and Caledonia counties. State investment in our public institutions—and one that is seen as directly benefitting Vermonters—is key economic development tool.

The previous testimony has also suggested ways to improve S.38, including

- The inclusion of the University of Vermont
- Making the program a last dollar program
- The inclusion of part-time students, many of whom are working and/or parents

All of which we support. We also know that there are pressures to restrict the bill because of the cost. I hope that the committee would explore all possible funding sources before restricting S. 38.

As committee members have suggested, two possible sources are

- some or all of the revenue from the internet tax
- Some or all of the marijuana tax.

Two other possible sources of revenue are both of which might fully fund S. 38:

- Restructuring the property tax to be based on income (S.52)
- Restructuring the income tax to recoup the Trump tax cuts to wealthy

Heather Riemer, AFT Vermont S.38 Testimony 2/15/19

While we are supporting a fully-funded S.38 (with improvements), we also are aware that it may be necessary to pursue a phased in approach, in which case, we would like to see a clear pathway to free in-state tuition for all Vermonters at all of our public institutions.

There are two models that we've heard committee members discuss:

1. Means test free in-state tuition or
2. Provide a limited number of semesters to all Vermonters

Here are our initial thoughts on the two pathways

Means tested free in-state tuition:

The pros: helps the neediest first, provides parity with UVM (which already provides free tuition to Vermonters who qualify for a Pell grant.)

The cons: means-tested programs tend to generate a lot of resentment, particularly for working families who are just over the line, and so miss out on the benefit. In addition, they can be complicated to administer, for instance for people who might be asset rich, but income poor.

A limited number of semesters of free in-state tuition:

The pros: They are available to all Vermonters, which should lead to broader political support now and in the future. This is easy to administer.

The cons: this may make it more difficult for those with the least family income to complete a degree.

If the committee chooses to restrict S.38, we would advocate for a clear path to free in-state tuition for all Vermonters, in the foreseeable future.

In closing, progress in the U.S. has often been led by the states. Almost 100 years ago, in 1827 Massachusetts was the first state to pass a law making all grades of public school open to all pupils free of charge. At the same time, most Southern states had passed laws forbidding teaching enslaved people the ability to read.

Now, states are moving to providing free in-state tuition to public tech centers, colleges and universities. We hope Vermont will help lead the way, and in so doing continue to invest in our students, our economy and our state.