

Linda Olson

Professor of Sociology and Women's and Gender Studies at Castleton University

President of the Vermont State Colleges Faculty Federation

Vice President of Education for the American Federation of Teachers Vermont

I am here to testify about S. 271 the Community College Scholarship Program. While I certainly support free tuition for CCV students, I am here to speak about why I don't believe this legislation goes far enough to help our Vermont college students. There are several issues I would like to address:

1. I am asking that free tuition be extended to all public institutions in the state and not just CCV.
  - a. Students who are currently enrolled in other colleges should also benefit from a reduction in their tuition and doing this has the long-term potential of benefitting the state dramatically. If students graduate from a state institution with no or little debt, they are more likely to be able to stay, work, and raise their families in Vermont after graduation. We have a growing demographic crisis in Vermont with fewer young people staying and living in the state, free tuition at all the public colleges and universities could help change this.
  - b. Free tuition at just CCV could cause an unintended consequence of harming the other public colleges by reducing enrollment, especially those colleges in the VSC. As you all know, state appropriations in Vermont is one of the lowest in the country and has been for a number of years. This means that all the public institutions have had to do more with less resources. As President of the VSC Faculty Federation and faculty member at Castleton University for 25 years, I have seen how this has impacted the VSCS colleges.
    - i. We have 25% fewer full-time faculty now than we did in 2012 and we have seen similar reduction in the staff as well. These cuts have significantly impacted our part time faculty as well.
    - ii. The VSCS faculty have consistently agreed to lower salaries because we are committed to saving our campuses, but this has meant that we are woefully underpaid when compared to other comparable public institutions.
    - iii. We have antiquated technology in our classrooms, and we have not been able to maintain the infrastructure of the campuses.
    - iv. We are already in such a precarious economic state due to lack of state support combined with changing demographics that not having access to free tuition as well could be devastating. I live in Rutland County and I have seen the impact on the communities when a college closes. If we lose one of the public colleges it will not just be the students, faculty and staff that suffer. The colleges provide so much to the communities in which they are located; whole towns virtually shut down and families are hit exceptionally hard.
    - v. As a union person, I am also concerned that these scholarships are only going to CCV which has an entirely part time faculty. In fact, it is the only community college in the country where this is true. I have talked to my part time colleagues at CCV about this, in fact, our union represents them too. They agree that offering just this benefit to CCV is problematic because there are only part time faculty and while this legislation proposes additional funds to create 4 new

staff positions, no full-time faculty positions would be created. Vermont needs full time jobs with benefits to keep people in the state.

- c. Despite the lack of support from the state, the colleges are still doing work that benefits the state. Since I am most familiar with Castleton, I will talk about some of the new programs added there to serve our students and the state. We have just added an early childhood education center, we have a new on-line MBA program, we have also added many certificate programs including our Cannabis Studies Certificate which is geared toward entrepreneurs and our Trauma Studies Certificate which helps professionals such as teachers, police officer, and social workers develop a trauma informed approach and help them deal with vicarious trauma. The loss of students because only CCV gets free tuition might erode all that good work.
2. I am also asking that these scholarships be first rather than last dollar. Research done by the Education Trust found that last dollar programs often have little to no financial benefit for the lowest income students. One of the goals of this scholarship program should be to try to get the 40% of Vermonters that don't go on for any post-secondary education to do so. One of the reasons so few go on is because of the high cost of education here due to lack of state support. I fear this legislation will do little to reduce that burden for our lowest income students.
3. Finally, while we do need to invest in CCV, it makes sense to make this same investment at the other public institutions. Four-year institutions and Technical Colleges like VTC have better retention rates than community colleges. They provide full-time jobs for Vermonters, they support families, and they attract new people to Vermont. We need to understand the value of academic institutions on our communities and my fear is that we realize their importance only after we are forced to close one of the colleges. Our state colleges are the innovative backbone of the state. Our public colleges, all of them including CCV, are desperate for funding. We all serve an important role in the health and well-being of the state. It is time the state make a concrete commitment to all of the public colleges and universities, for the welfare of the state.

Thank you for your time and I hope you will consider making a commitment to support all the public colleges and universities.