

May 4, 2021

Dear Representatives

Thank you for your consideration of the Vermont State College System's requests for funding this year and for your generous support in H.439, *An act relating to making appropriations for the support of government*, especially regarding the transformation funding and the Critical Occupations scholarships and Workforce Development Initiatives for Vermont learners.

In H.439 *Senate proposal of amendment*, you will find much agreement with the House position, specifically:

- \$30.5 million in our regular base appropriation (General Fund),
- \$5 million increase to the base (General Fund),
- \$20 million in Transformation money to support system transformation over the next four years (Federal Funds),
- \$21 million in bridge funding to address our current structural deficit (Federal Funds. The House allocated \$20 million for the system-wide deficit due to COVID-19 and \$1 million for operating costs due to COVID-19. The Senate combined these into one allocation), and
- Funds for Critical Occupations Scholarships and Workforce Development (Federal Funds, of which the House allocated \$20.5 million and the Senate allocated \$12.4 million. It is important to note that some of the House proposed programs were funded in H.315/Act 9, as outlined below).

Additionally, in H.315/Act 9, *An act relating to COVID-19 relief*, you will find:

- \$3 million in a second Workforce Development Initiative in 2021-2022,
- \$1.4 million to stand up a Practical Nursing Program at Long-Term Care Facilities statewide, and
- \$2.8 million to VSAC for Vermont High School graduates in the Class of 2020 or 2021 to take up to two courses at VSCS institutions.

One Workforce Development Initiative issue in the Critical Occupations Scholarships we would like to bring to your attention is the availability of funds for use for student wraparound services. You may recall that in the CRF Workforce Initiative stood up in Fall 2020, wraparound services to students for expenses such as technology needed to access the courses, childcare, transportation, and textbook assistance were critical to reduce barriers to access the courses for learners. In H.439 *as passed by the House*, wraparound services were specified in the language for the 2021-2022 initiative, as they are in the language the Senate proposes for a third Workforce Initiative in 2022-2023. When this was put into H.315/Act 9, the language was omitted, we believe accidentally. **We respectfully request consideration of a correction in the budget for the 2021-2022 initiative to allow us to provide this service consistently in all three initiatives.**

Additionally, there are two changes to the Free Tuition program that we would like to bring forward for your consideration. First, the Senate set aside 20% of the free tuition funds for the paramedicine/EMS program. While this is an incredibly generous gesture to our schools and to our students, it may be difficult for VSCS to use the full allocation of \$1 million for this program, given course capacity and enrollment trends. **If the legislature wishes to set aside funds specifically for the paramedicine program, we might suggest a set aside of \$500,000 for two years.**

Second, because the Senate amendment eliminates the internship scholarships, we want to make you aware that the programs in these areas of study critical to Vermont - mental health counseling and education - are not identified for specific coverage by the Critical Occupations scholarships. While the \$5 million allotted to Free Tuition unfortunately will not cover the students enrolled in these undergraduate programs, **we propose that graduate students in education and mental health counseling could be included in this program.** This would include Vermont graduate students enrolled in:

- Master in Education (all programs)
- Master in Educational Leadership
- Master of Arts & Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in School Psychology
- Masters in Counseling
- Masters in Clinical Mental Health Counseling.

As we discussed in our initial Critical Occupations testimony, these fields often have high degree and credentialing requirements, but offer lower pay, creating a barrier for entry for students wishing to pursue these degrees. By offsetting the cost of tuition, we believe we can incentivize students to pursue these careers by reducing the debt with which they might otherwise graduate.

In our testimony today, we shared that our deposit deadlines for students, while rolling, are quickly approaching. **We are excited for the opportunity to offer these scholarships to our students, but we propose that they be made available *effective on passage*, and for two academic years, 2021-2022 and 2022-2023** to allow us to (1) weather the transformation years leading up to the launch of the new institution and to be able to fully provide these scholarships, and (2) to enable us to market them to prospective students over the next two years. We believe this will optimize our use of these funds and will allow us to utilize them as an enrollment incentive.

Finally, the Senate also made several small changes to the transformation success metrics and accountability language in H.439. We recognize the significant investment the state has made in our schools, our students, and our system, especially in the last twelve months. We welcome being held accountable and the opportunity to work in partnership with the state to accomplish our shared goals of system transformation for a better future for our students, our schools, and the state in the years to come. **We agree with the Senate's updates, although we leave it to the General Assembly to determine if middle ground on the language should be sought.**

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me at Sophie.Zdatny@vsc.edu or to VSCS Director of External and Governmental Affairs, Katherine Levasseur at Katherine.Levasseur@vsc.edu with further questions.

Sincerely,



Sophie Zdatny
Chancellor
Vermont State Colleges System