

April 26, 2022

To the Senate Committee on Education:

Thank you for the opportunity to weigh in on the proposed amendment to H.456.

I understand that the goal of the proposed amendment is to increase communication, accountability, and engagement between the stakeholders at the colleges and with the Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees. This is an important goal, and one the Board of Trustees shares. It is why the Board has engaged in multiple listening sessions with the public, campus Town Hall meetings, and hears public comment at Board and Committee meetings. The Board also supports the work the Chancellor and transformation teams have engaged in over the last two years. Specifically, meeting monthly with bargaining unit leadership, engaging in regular Town Hall meetings on the campuses, establishing a diverse Student Advisory Committee for the transformation work, supporting faculty work on the program array for the new university, and involving faculty and staff on the transformation teams.

The proposed language providing that “the faculty senate shall oversee all faculty or staff elections,” which would be held on or before July 31, 2022 is not workable at this time. The Vermont State Colleges are in a critical period and there are many aspects of system operations that will change over the next year as we move from four institutions to two. One piece of this is the shared governance model we have with our faculty. Currently, we have faculty assemblies at Northern Vermont University-Johnson, Northern Vermont University-Lyndon, Vermont Technical College, and Castleton University, responsible for, among other things, the composition of academic programs and courses, and degree requirements. We also have a Staff Council at Vermont Technical College. How part-time faculty are represented at the three institutions varies. We also have part-time faculty at Community College of Vermont, but no formal faculty assembly structure. The governance model of the new university – Vermont State University—is yet to be determined. Establishing that a Trustee election be overseen by an entity that does not currently exist, nor is it certain it will exist in the future, is problematic. The governance model of Vermont State University will not be determined for at least several months. In addition, while this proposed language duplicates the language in the section of the bill addressing the University of Vermont’s Board of Trustees, it is important to note that the VSC is a system, not a single institution.

Finally, this proposal does not mitigate the very serious conflict of interest that having an employee on a governing Board presents. This conflict presents legal and fiduciary problems for the system and the Board. Not the Chancellor, nor any President, nor any member of the administration of any of the colleges serves on the Board for very good reasons. The Board must be able to function independently of any interested party or group with the strategic priorities of the system at its core. The Board is the fiduciary of the system – not any single institution or interested party. The Board hires the Chancellor and Presidents, who have direct

oversight and hiring authority at the institutions. The Board determines the system budget, over 64% of which is salaries and benefits of employees. The Board makes decisions about program elimination, which has a direct impact on employees. The Board sets the goals of collective bargaining agreements and ratifies them, which is a serious and direct conflict of interest with an employee serving on the Board. The responsibilities listed above are the core responsibilities of the VSC Board. This raises significant questions as to the possible effectiveness of an employee trustee.

I understand the committee's desire to improve communication and collaboration at the Vermont State Colleges; however, I urge the Committee to reconsider this amendment. I know a proposal has been brought to you from the Chancellor's Office to spend the next eight months exploring better opportunities for collaboration and communication between that office, the Board, the transformation teams, and the stakeholders at the colleges, and to share practices and opportunities for collaboration with the University of Vermont. I fully support that proposal and request that the committee give the VSC time to continue the transformation work, establish the governance model for the new institution in collaboration with the faculty and staff, and continue to meet the expectations of the state for a complete system transformation.

I am providing this written testimony to the committee; however, I am also holding time this afternoon and am available, should the committee have follow up questions.

Sincerely,

Representative Lynn Dickinson  
Chair, Vermont State Colleges Board of Trustees