

# THE J. WARREN LOIS MCCLURE FOUNDATION

*Promoting access to postsecondary and career education for Vermonters*

To: Senate Education Committee  
From: Carolyn Weir, Executive Director  
Date: February 10, 2021

## **Testimony: Impacts and insights from the McClure Foundation's graduation gift to the Vermont High School Class of 2020**

Thank you Mr. Chair and the Committee for welcoming me to testify about what we've learned from our graduation gift to the Vermont high school class of 2020. For the record, my name is Carolyn Weir, and I am here on behalf of the McClure Foundation, where I serve as Executive Director.

As it's helpful, I invite you to refer to the three-page fact sheet on the initiative that I've submitted for today's testimony.

We're a 25-year affiliate of the Vermont Community Foundation that has spent the last decade or so exclusively focused on workforce development and supporting college and career training systems in ways that promote equity and resilience.

When the scope of the pandemic became clear last spring, including signs of mass deferments in postsecondary continuation among those seniors approaching high school graduation, we asked ourselves a question: in this time of uncertainty, what could we do to offer graduating seniors an easy option for continuing their education and, behind-the-scenes, support a relational handoff from high-school-based counselors to college-based academic and career advisors who could help chart next steps?

Keeping to our design values of hope and simplicity—in terms of both messaging and access—we landed on a graduation gift to the entire Vermont high school class of 2020 of one free course of their choosing at CCV last fall. Our gift covered tuition and all fees associated with any course a student chose to take, including courses that are part of shorter-term certificate programs.

Given all the uncertainties in play, we quite frankly weren't sure how many students would take us up on the offer. By September, over 600 students had enrolled in their free course – representing over 10% of graduates statewide and double the typical enrollment of this cohort at CCV. This was at a time when first-year enrollment at community colleges was down over 20% nationally.

As you know, Vermont has long been an outlier nationally in terms of the percentage of the General Fund allocated to public higher education and in terms of the tuition cost of public colleges generally and CCV specifically – conditions we believe have impacted Vermont's demographics and the credentialing of Vermont's workforce. So to see Vermont profiled nationally as a bright spot in terms of community college enrollment last fall was really something.

And to us, the scale of enrollment in this initiative demonstrates that when the public's *perception* of cost barriers is removed, Vermonters enroll. Also: the perception of ease of access matters.

Early demographic data confirmed that the gift benefited students from all backgrounds: about half say they would be first-in-family with a degree. And Orleans County had the highest enrollment rate relative to its young adult population.

We heard from students and parents that the gift relieved financial stress, helped clarify career interests and abilities, and encouraged or convinced these young adults to continue their education amid so much disruption.

A student named Nick says college was something he dreamed about but never thought he would be able to afford. He's from a low-income household and "every dollar counts." He took two CCV courses – including Intro to Visual Communications– and says college felt manageable because half of his courses were paid for. He was working full-time as a personal care attendant while taking the courses and his dream is to become a graphic designer.

Of the 1,200 or so CCV courses in which students enrolled, 90% were completed and about 70% completed successfully. What matters the most to us: 80% of surveyed students interacted with their CCV advisor during the fall semester. The large majority involved discussion or development of plans for next steps in education and career development. 81% of surveyed students indicate they plan to continue their education.

Looking back, we point to three factors in the early success of the initiative.

#1: The core design values were hope and simplicity. Every component of this initiative was designed to inspire hope and to be easy to understand and to access. The scholarships were first-dollar-in; they were only available at CCV; students could choose any course available at CCV; every single person who graduated from high school in Vermont in 2020 was eligible. We believe that structuring the gift as an easily understood and universal opportunity for students encouraged take-up across the board. Our messaging was simple and positive: we told young people we believed in them and thought they deserved something they could count on in this time of uncertainty.

#2: We partnered with an institution that embraced a big idea on a short timeline and was positioned to quickly scale its courses and supports. CCV was ready to serve. They're Vermont's access institution: they enroll the greatest number of Vermonters of any college in the state. Becoming a CCV student is simple and so is transferring CCV credits, which made them the logical choice of partner in a continuation initiative. (I think about what Dr. Biden said publicly yesterday: "Community colleges are our most powerful engine of prosperity." I think that's true generally and especially in the context of COVID recovery.)

#3: We ensured extra supports for CCV and students, such as funding to help administer and evaluate the initiative and incentives for students to connect with academic advisors, career consultants, and peer advisory groups.

All in, the initiative cost \$655,000.

I think it's worth noting that we're not historically a scholarship funder. But we've come to believe scholarships are a particularly useful tool *during the pandemic* for *inspiring public hope* in the value and accessibility of college and career training. We dipped into our invested assets almost double what we'd budgeted in 2020 in order to make it happen, and what we learned has helped us clarify our vision of what's possible in Vermont: guaranteed affordable college and career training options that are easily understood and accessed, that lead to good jobs and that create more equity and resilience in communities.

And while scholarships are a tool philanthropy has historically leaned on, and we think Vermonters deserve one-time enrollment incentives during the pandemic, we don't see scholarships alone as a systemic long-term approach for affordability unless they're paired with significant direct investments (including in tuition reductions) in the places where students who are least likely to continue are most likely to go.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony. I welcome any questions you have.