

Testimony of Michele Perry Senate Education Committee

My name is Michele Perry. I live in Fair Haven and I am speaking as a private citizen. I am in my 16th year at Castleton University, where I work in the library as the cataloger, archivist, and interim InterLibrary Loan supervisor.

I will keep my comments to about five minutes to leave enough time for questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee, for giving me and other front-line workers at the Vermont State Colleges a few minutes to tell you why we believe the decision announced two months ago by state college administrators is short sighted and will have adverse results on students and the regional economies in which the colleges are located.

Physical libraries with books and digital services supported by trained librarians are the core function of each institution of higher education.

The decision to close traditional libraries and fire trained staff, if left unchanged, will hurt students, will hurt libraries services; such as Reserves and shut down functional local and regional interLibrary programs and will hurt the institutions themselves, as fewer students will choose to attend our state colleges.

The decisions have sent just about every wrong message that can be sent by institutions seeking to increase enrollment. Projected enrollment at the campuses for the next academic year is **down**. Requests from existing students for paperwork to transfer to other institutions are **up**.

As I make my presentation today, let me clearly state the relief we request your committee adopt and recommend to the full Senate. First, we request your committee recommend reversing the decision to fire the librarians and convert the libraries to a mostly digital service. Second, we request your committee recommend withdrawing the legislative mandate that the state colleges cut \$5 million per year for five years for a total of \$25 million. Third, we request your committee consider the impact of the Administration's proposed actions on the health and longevity of the institutions – the students, faculty, staff, and the communities they serve.

The General Assembly should not on one hand expect these state institutions to increase enrollment while at the same time insist they cut \$25 million during these inflationary times. The mandatory budget reduction decision, made in 2021 and never adjusted to account

for raging inflation in 2022 and 2023, are cutting into core functions of the campuses in Castleton, Randolph, Lyndon, Johnson, and the Community College of Vermont.

State agencies and departments of state government have their budgets reviewed and adjusted every January, through the Budget Adjustment Act. On behalf of the students, faculty, and staff at the state colleges, we ask for the same consideration.

What was initially supposed to be an enhancement of the existing libraries by increasing digital services ended up being a plan to dump most books, fire the librarians and effectively cancel the inter-library loan program. A perfect trifecta. Dumping books and firing librarians will hurt students who don't know how to use a library, will hurt the institutions by causing a likely decline in enrollment, and will hurt the communities by effectively ending the inter-library loan program.

The Administration claims, "This approach is consistent with the principles driving this transformation: student first, purpose first, digital first." However, nowhere in this entire plan does it reflect the students' thoughts and requests. As you have seen and heard over the past two months, students and faculty are outraged at this proposal and they have loudly protested on the campuses, to the Board of Trustees and here at the State House.

Regrettably, some students are also protesting with their feet and with their education dollars – many, apparently, are delaying decisions to re-enroll or they are taking steps to transfer out and enroll in other institutions. We are also facing the loss of financial donations that not only support the library, but the general fund; as well.

The library at Castleton University is a safe, welcoming space for students, faculty, staff, researchers, authors, artists, and community members to spend their time reading and learning. The librarians help each one of them by helping them find books and publications, and teaching them how to use the library and other resources, including online digital resources.

Federal work study funds require that for an institution to qualify, 7% of the jobs on campus must be community services based. The state college libraries contribute to this percentage with the number of workstudy jobs available in the libraries. Will the colleges be approved for federal work study funding? Perhaps.

The state colleges are often credited with providing college opportunities for first generation students, and for a new generation of the Vermont workforce. I believe it is imperative the General Assembly continue to work with these educational resources.

Thank you.