

To: Vermont State College System Communities
From: Chancellor Sophie Zdatny
Re: **Transformation Update #16**
Date: November 8, 2021

Dear Vermont State Colleges Community,

Our regular updates to you throughout the Transformation process can be found on the VSCS website at www.vsc.edu/transformation.

How did we get here?

The Vermont State Colleges System was facing a significant and unsustainable structural deficit, even before the pandemic hit.¹ Declining enrollment across all campuses, smaller high school graduating classes, significant debt due to campus infrastructure needs, and chronic underfunding from the state had placed tremendous pressure on the finances of the system over the last decade. The VSC's structural issues have been years in the making. See [Finance and Facilities Materials \(October 18, 2021\)](#) at pages 19-20 (Financial Ratios).

The pandemic intensified the financial woes and pushed the system to the brink of insolvency. The former Chancellor put forward a proposal to shutter three of our rural campuses in April 2020, which was promptly rejected by the state.² The state provided emergency bridge funding to keep each of our institutions open, while the state outlined its expectations for a complete and transparent system overhaul.

Why are we on this transformation path?

With the bridge funding provided in 2020, the state established the *Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education in Vermont*. The Select Committee was made up of legislators, members of the Governor's administration, community stakeholders, a Vermont Tech student, a Castleton alumni, a Northern Vermont University faculty member, VSC administrators, and external stakeholders, including the presidents of the University of Vermont and the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation. The Select Committee was tasked with making recommendations for how the VSC and the state should move forward with a complete system redesign so the VSC could continue to deliver on its mission to Vermont and achieve financial stability.

¹ A structural deficit exists when an entity's expenses persistently exceed its revenues.

² Because the system is one single corporate entity, the failure of any one of its institution would have an immediate and devastating impact on the financial sustainability of the remaining institutions.

The Select Committee recognized that the VSC's financial challenges could not be reversed overnight. The Select Committee held regular public meetings between September 2020 and April 2021. The Select Committee reviewed materials and proposals from numerous stakeholders, including the NVU Strong Advisory Committee, the Labor Task Force for Public Higher Education, Vermont Technical College's Transformation work, VSCS Thrive, and the VSCS Forward Task Force.³ As well as reviewing an extensive volume of financial and enrollment data from the VSC and comparing this with comparable higher education institutions,⁴ the Select Committee held interviews and focus groups with a broad range of internal and external stakeholders.

In its Final Report, released in April 2021, the members of the Select Committee unanimously agreed on a five-year plan for the state to increase the VSC's state funding by over 67%, provide bridge funding to backfill our budget deficit as we transform, and sponsor the transformation work. In return, the VSC had to commit to a total system overhaul, including unifying Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College as one new university while maintaining our current campus locations, consolidating administrative services across the system, and eliminating the structural budget deficit over the next five years.

The Select Committee recognized the VSC is an indispensable state asset, emphasized its mission to provide affordable, accessible, high quality, and relevant education to students of all types (including working adults, underrepresented and low income populations, and rural residents), on its physical campuses and through robust online education. It recommended that the VSC be restructured, preserving elements of our institutions' history and traditions while collectively offering courses and programs in multiple modalities, including face to face and online, and according to schedules that remove barriers to students' enrollment and success.

In February 2021, following a six-week opportunity for submitting written comments and a public listening session, the **VSC Board of Trustees** voted to adopt the plan outlined by the Select Committee.⁵ The state endorsed the plan, established requirements for the VSC to meet as we implement the plan, and charged the Chancellor and the Board with executing the Select Committee's plan in Act 74, the Fiscal Year 2022 State Budget.⁶

For its part, **the state** increased the annual state support for the VSC by 16% this year, the largest one-year increase in VSC history. The state also provided the funds recommended by the Select Committee to sponsor the transformation work and backfill our budget deficit. Additionally, it

³ See [Select Committee's Final Report \(April 2021\)](#) at Appendix C, pp. 134-37.

⁴ See footnote 3, Final Report, at Appendix B, pp. 116-133.

⁵ Although the Select Committee's Final Report was not issued until April 2021, its central recommendations remained unchanged from its Initial Report in December 2020 and its February 2021 Revised Report. A copy of the Transformation proposal adopted by the Board is available [here](#).

⁶ See [Act 74](#) at p.181 ("The Chancellor shall establish policies and procedures to implement the Board approved transformation plan as developed by the Select Committee on Higher Education.").

provided over \$16 million in direct student aid for scholarships, free tuition opportunities, and free classes this year.

We are not alone

Colleges and universities across the country are confronting the same challenges as the VSC. Indeed, several small private colleges in Vermont have closed in recent years.⁷ The VSC institutions have benefited from being part of a public higher education system⁸ but public systems have their challenges too, including in New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and Maine. With the state's unprecedented investment in the VSC and our students over the past eighteen months:

- ✓ 3,775 of our 10,551 students received a new state scholarship this year.
- ✓ Thanks to bridge funding, there have been no layoffs.
- ✓ State dollars, not student tuition dollars, are funding the transformation work.
- ✓ We were able to freeze tuition for the 2021-2022 academic year.
- ✓ Our physical campuses remain open and accessible to our students.

Where are we now?

Transformation is a multi-year process. We have come a long way in the last eighteen months. Some of these successes include:

- ✓ A system-wide General Education core
- ✓ Significant progress on unifying the academic program array for the new university
- ✓ Secured state funding of the transformation work and an increase to our state funding
- ✓ Established four main transformation teams, with many sub-teams, staffed by employees from across the system, bringing their individual knowledge and expertise to bear in shaping the new university and consolidating our administrative processes
- ✓ Established a name, mission, and vision for the new university

Where are we going?

With transformation, the VSC is committed to revolutionary change – modernizing our academic programs, streamlining our administrative processes, strengthening our student services, and expanding our workforce development and continuing education programming. We are committed to doing this in a way that enhances our offerings to Vermont learners, keeps public higher education accessible in our rural communities, and seeks to eliminate our structural deficit over the next four years. We have received strong support from the state for the last two fiscal years and anticipate further support if we continue to make progress with transformation.

⁷ These include the College of St. Joseph, Southern Vermont College, Burlington College, Marlboro College, and Green Mountain College.

⁸ For example, two of the member institutions were able to rely on the support of their sister institutions to cover budget deficits with a system loan in recent years.

Transformational change on the scale expected by the state is extremely hard and is made even more challenging in the face of the fatigue and uncertainty resulting from the global pandemic. Change brings with it many emotions, including fear, sadness, anxiety, anger, grief, and a sense of loss. However, we know by working together, respectfully and with kindness, we can build a new university, with a solid foundation, robust and high-quality academic programs, strong student support services, aligned business practices, well-maintained facilities, and meaningful employer and community partnerships.

We can do this and we can do it right. For an illustrative example of where we are going, take a look at [Vermont State Colleges System works to expand hybrid learning model \(wcax.com\)](https://www.wcax.com/story/news/education/2021/10/28/vermont-state-colleges-system-works-to-expand-hybrid-learning-model/7048144002).

Thank you to all those who have participated in this transformation work. We have made a strong and meaningful start thanks to the incredible work of the faculty, each staff member, and administrator. Our students and alumni have also provided meaningful input in stakeholder groups, advisory council meetings, and more. This is tremendously hard work and as transformation moves forward, we are overcoming increasingly difficult challenges.

QUICK BULLETS

1. Information Technology update – Portal project:

In late April, [we announced](#) the kick-off of our new portal project, a critical system that will provide a one-stop-shop to support a unified delivery of key systems, communications, and more. Over 35 members of our community have been involved in this project and we are excited to be at a point in the project where we will be providing a preview to each of the branded college portals in addition to working with our community to do “user experience testing.” We will be visiting campuses in early December, hoping to engage with students and gather feedback in addition to offering commercials for our faculty and staff to preview and provide feedback. We are very excited for the upcoming launch of our portal in the new year and look forward to sending out more information in the next few weeks of how you can get involved.

2. Upcoming Discovery Gate Meetings

Over the last few months, the Academic Operations and Student Experience Transformation teams have been engaged in the Discovery stage of the Transformation process.⁹ They have learned from each other what we do at the different institutions and across different campuses. They have asked questions about what is working, what is not working, and what best practices from others should be considered as we build a new university. They have collected information from students through the Student Advisory Council, and they have worked with their peers across all our campuses to bring forward ideas. This week these teams will be meeting with the project Sponsors and Stakeholders to share the work they have done and present the recommended Design Principles they intend to follow as they move into the Design Stage.

⁹ For an overview of the transformation process, see [Virtual Town Hall Meeting on Transformation - July 26, 2021 - YouTube](#).

These principles provide the key requirements and direction that we will use as we design the future programs, processes, and services for students and the new university. This is an important milestone in the transformation process for these two teams, and over the next few weeks we can share more details about our priorities as we move into the Design stage.

3. Student Advisory Council Update from October 28, 2021 Meeting

Topics related to the student experience, such as student activities, student government, residence life, student services, and athletics were discussed at the fourth Student Advisory Council meeting. Here are some key themes that emerged:

- It is important to maintain a local presence and management for student clubs and activities on each campus to address the unique needs of students and maintain connections with the community.
- Some campuses have a large percentage of student clubs focused on majors and future professions, but at other places more of a mix of activities.
- It would be good to have some coordination of student activities and events across campuses so that students at all campuses know what is available.
- More communication across campuses of what opportunities are available to all VSC students is needed (*e.g.* trip to see baseball in Boston, museum trip, concerts, *etc.*).
- It would be great to provide opportunities for CCV students to participate in activities and events too where possible.
- Activities or trips that involve multiple campuses would be valued, and maybe some online ways for students to connect and get to know each other.
- Student government should be maintained on local campuses where possible with a linkage with the VSCSA to provide coordination across campuses.
- There are differences in the way funds get distributed across the campuses and it would be good to adopt best practices (*e.g.* budgeting, who decides what) but to also have some variation based on needs of students at each place.
- Counseling and wellness services are appreciated and staff provide support to different groups, but there could be better communication about what is available, especially when services are provided by community partners, rather than on campus.
- Need more capacity for counseling, and physical health services are inconsistent across the campuses and not well understood by students
- Building infrastructure is the most significant concern for residence life programs (*e.g.* heat/AC, facilities upkeep).
- Students would like to have a choice of different housing configurations groups, suites, apartments for students in different situations.

- Students liked the idea of having residential options available for students from other campuses, particularly in summer or semester to support travel for internships.
- The role of Community Advisors and Resident Advisors is critical to the student experience, and there should be consistency in training and expectations for public safety (duty phone), and opportunities to learn from each other, *etc.*
- Athletics is a really important part of student life on some campuses, but less on others.
- Athletics is important to the environment that is created, and the branding elements are very important in building the student community.
- Some sports need better facilities for practicing and competitions, particularly to ensure safety, not just practicing in the gym.
- It would be good to foster some friendly competition among the campuses like the President's Cup at NVU, which would provide opportunities to travel to other campuses.

UPCOMING BOARD MEETINGS

Agenda and meeting materials for upcoming meetings are posted [here](#).

December 6, 2021 EPSL Board Committee Meeting (Zoom)

December 6, 2021 Board of Trustees Meeting (Zoom)¹⁰

January 24, 2022 Board of Trustees Meeting (Zoom)

Scheduling additional meetings for the Finance and Facilities Committee and the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee are planned.

Additional information about Board and Committee meetings, including information on how to access the meetings may be found [here](#).

PUBLIC INPUT

We will continue to solicit broad input as our transformation continues. **We encourage you to share your feedback at [this link](#).** This feedback is reviewed and posted monthly on the transformation website.

With kind regards,

Sophie

¹⁰ NOTE – this is a change. The meeting was originally scheduled to be held in person at Vermont Tech-Randolph but it will now be held virtually to facilitate public access.