

The McHugh Report

Vermont State Colleges Report and Recommendation

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Dr. James T. (Jim) McHugh is Professor and former Chair of Political Science at the University of Akron, where he also is a Fellow and Director of Academic Planning for the Ray C. Bliss Institute for Applied Politics and where he currently is establishing the university's Global Studies program. He has had an extensive career as a teacher, researcher (with several publications), and administrator at the university level.

Previously, he served as Professor of Political Science, Acting Associate Director of the School of Policy Studies, and Director of the Legal Studies Program at Roosevelt University in Chicago. He also served as Associate Director (and *de facto* day-to-day director) of the Center for North American Studies and a Visiting Professor in the School of International Service at American University in Washington, DC, where he also temporarily filled some of the responsibilities of Assistant Vice-President in the Office of International Affairs.

Dr. McHugh also has been an adjunct Lecturer at the University of Vermont, Fulbright Distinguished Chair for North American Integration at Carleton University in Ottawa, and Vermont Regional Director for the Borgen Project. Among his external activities, he has been President of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States, President of the Illinois Political Science Association, and a member of the Executive Council for the New England Political Science Association.

He is a fourth-generation Vermonter (with a strong devotion to his native state) who received his BA from UVM in History, Political Science, and Area and International Studies, a Master of Letters (MLitt) in History from the University of Edinburgh, a PhD in Political Studies from Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and a post-graduate Public Administration Certificate in University Administration from Roosevelt University.

A Critical Assessment of the Crisis in the Vermont State College System

Part I: The Current Situation

Several challenges have reached a point of convergence to create the current crisis facing Northern Vermont University [NVU] and the entire Vermont State Colleges [VSC] system. Addressing the underlying conditions that have produced these challenges has been delayed, in some cases, for years or decades. Solving them requires determination, imagination, and a reassessment of the underlying values of higher education, including a willingness to return to some of the foundational principles of that tradition and its relationship to Vermont and its people.

The most serious challenge is, of course, monetary. However, that challenge can be an opportunity for reassessing the missions and method of the entire college system within Vermont. However, that opportunity can be realized only if it is framed within the central mission of higher education and, specifically, that mission as it applies, specifically, to Vermont. It must, therefore, be academic-focused, especially in terms of the quality of the curriculum and the knowledge it imparts. Higher education cannot be perceived merely as a product but as a *means* of achieving the good life for society and its people. That mission also belongs to the political system so it *absolutely must* be part of that process, though it is unfeasible for it to be the sole process.

The Problem

The reason that Northern Vermont University was forged from the union of Johnson State College [JSC] and Lyndon State College [LSC] was in response to the problems that the entire system has experienced. For decades, the Vermont State Colleges system was generating decreasing revenue relative to its expenses. Its asset-to-debt ration has been particularly precarious, as a 2012 audit indicated. Simultaneously, the demographics of the student body were shifting in

response to demographic changes within American and Vermont societies. Expectations and goals relating to higher education also were changing, often in response to economic needs and cultural expectations. The 1980s was a decade in which some of those changes occurred with particular notoriety. An increasingly prevalent spirit of the times was a hostility toward “big government” as part of a Lockean liberal reaction toward social democratic reforms of the 1950s through the 1970s. One expression of that ethos was a belief that public institutions (including higher education) could become more efficient and effective if run along the same principles as corporations and other for-profit businesses.

Part of the result of that cultural attitude toward governing principles was a trend toward treating students as “customers” who should be satisfied in the same way as a conventional customer is when purchasing a commodity. For many policy makers, that approach included a desire to make the overall college and university experience as attractive as possible, including a campus life dedicated to an environment that included features that were not directly relevant to the primary mission of higher education. One informal survey in Northeast Ohio indicated that, among parents of students choosing a college or university to attend, the most important considerations mentioned were that the campus be “fun” and “safe” with the quality of the curriculum mentioned much less frequently. That attitude was a reflection of the environment in which higher education was regarded as a rite of passage for entering the workforce in the absence of traditional manufacturing and service jobs that were rapidly disappearing. That economic situation is not entirely unlike certain regions of Vermont, such as the Northeast Kingdom.

Among the consequences of that cultural shift was the growth of campus infrastructure to include structures that directly support the academic mission (such as classrooms and teaching-related technology) but, also, infrastructure that is not directly related, including sports teams,

athletic centers, food courts, cafes, bars, dormitory complexes, and recreational facilities that are expensive to build and maintain. Another consequence was the growth of administration to support these expanding and complex campuses. That growth was experienced not only in the number of administrative (including senior and executive) positions but, also, in compensation for those salaries that grew, exponentially, during these decades. Academic administration was transformed, in many instances, from an opportunity for academic service on the part of senior faculty into a path to professional success as an alternative to the traditional path of the MBA and a subsequent corporate career.

The Vermont State Colleges system has not experienced those trends in the same way found in other parts of the United States and certain other countries. For example, executive salaries have not been particularly outrageous, though they have markedly outpaced faculty salaries. Nonetheless, the budgetary portion of infrastructure and administration has proportionally outpaced the budgetary expenditure of direct academic costs, including faculty who are *absolutely central* to that mission. One metric for demonstrating that increasing imbalance has been the growth of student-to-faculty ratios, which are an important measurement for determining academic ranking among colleges and universities. Another metric has been the general trend toward hiring part-time instructors in place of full-time faculty. Although part-time faculty members are, typically, excellent teachers, their role has been incomplete in terms of the mission of higher education and their compensation has been extremely low, especially when considering the heavy teaching loads they often are forced to accept in an attempt to achieve a semblance of financial security. Those conditions have contributed to an overall undermining of the quality of higher education, generally and including within Vermont.

Even when managed as carefully as possible, colleges and universities are expensive to maintain, especially under conditions of high quality. However, as is true for many expensive investments, higher education is worth it. That value may not be always apparent when framed within the context of a commercial metric of financial cost and accumulation. Education (including at its highest levels) is, like health care, a human right and essential for achieving a good society. Nonetheless, even by a conventional economic analysis, higher education provides tangible benefits for the fiscal health and well-being of society in multiple ways. It also has a direct and indirect effect upon the economies of the communities where they are situated, including in terms of providing jobs (especially in staff and support positions), revenue to local businesses, opportunities for adult education beyond the traditional curriculum experience, and an overall improvement of the quality of life within those communities.

This assessment requires a more detailed review of VSC's individual and collective campuses and their respective infrastructure and personnel. It also necessitates an acknowledgment of the very real limitations in terms of projected enrollments of traditional students, the capacity for the State of Vermont to provide fiscal support, and the infrastructure necessary to achieve the academic mission while meeting student needs and reasonable expectations. VSC has had a diverse experience in this respect it should be factored into a critical assessment of its future and the reforms that will allow it to develop in a sustainable and high quality manner.

The Current Structure

VSC currently consists of one four-year autonomous technical college, two autonomous four-year universities (one of which was created from the merger of two formerly autonomous colleges), and 12 community college sites. The average size of each of the autonomous campuses has been roughly 1,500 students during the past several years. Community College of Vermont

has approximately 6,000 students, the vast majority of whom attend on a part-time basis. The university and colleges consist, overwhelmingly, of undergraduate students, though important post-graduate constituencies also exist on these campuses, ranging in size from 100 to 250 graduate students. Total enrollments for the four-year campuses have averaged just under 6,000 students during the past several years.

Each campus consists of full-time faculty, part-time faculty, staff, and administrators. The ratio of each category has shifted during the past several decades with an increase in the percentage of staff and a distinct increase in the increase in both part-time faculty and administrators. The administration of each campus is extensive and it has increased, relative to faculty size, for several years. Furthermore, the ratio of part-time to full-time (especially tenured and tenure-track) faculty also has been increasing, steadily, for a considerable time. A 2018 study demonstrated that executive administrative salaries within the VSC system have risen at a considerably higher rate than faculty salaries, which have not even kept pace with inflation.

Executive and senior administrator positions are a notable feature of each VSC campus. According to organizational charts from 2019, each campus has multiple officers at this level. Salaries vary among them, depending upon seniority. The highest salaries (president and provost/academic dean) appears to average around \$160,000. Dean positions average around \$110,000, while directors and equivalent positions vary, widely, typically between \$60,000-\$85,000. These figures are higher than all but the most senior full-time faculty positions. According to those 2019 charts, VTC has 20 executive and senior administrative positions, NVU has 12, and Castleton has 37. Organizational charts for CCV were unavailable.

The ratio of deficit to assets for VSC is the most alarming aspect of its fiscal situation. It has been worsening for several years and declining enrollments have exacerbated the situation.

Therefore, it is important to consider the costs and assets of the system and its institutions. All of these campuses have infrastructure that includes student living and recreational facilities. They also have been trying to keep pace with technological developments, including distance-learning tools. As with all “brick and mortar” colleges and universities, the campuses of the VSC system have physical structures that require routine maintenance and must account for depreciation. Furthermore, modifications to account for technological innovations constitute an additional necessary expense. Physical grounds present similar infrastructural costs.

These expenses are consolidated with other administrative expenses, for accounting purposes, as institutional costs for operating the system and its campuses. A cursory examination of this category indicates that it has accounted for nearly 25% of all costs according to a 2014 study. This figure is extremely high, especially when compared to other colleges and universities. Even UVM, which has been criticized for dedicating too much of its budget to administrative costs, only devotes less than 7% of its budget to this category. The category of academic support (including laboratories, administration offices, libraries, and professional support centers) account for more than 11% of the VSC budget, compared to 6.7% for UVM, which is comparable to most other institutions of higher education. These figures may be higher because the budget item for infrastructure such as dormitories typically is included with auxiliary spending, though it may be consolidated within one of these other categories, instead.

The crucial point is that, overall, as a percentage of spending, VSC devotes far more of its budget to institutional, administrative, and academic support costs than most other colleges and universities and, consequently, substantially less to its faculty and direct teaching costs, which are *absolutely central* to the system’s mission statement—in fact, faculty teaching students *is* the mission statement. According to a 2017 study, administrative costs have risen, dramatically, at

least since the beginning of the century, especially in comparison with peer institutions. In fact, the comparative disparity of administrative spending is 2.5 times as great for VSC as opposed to equivalent colleges, elsewhere.

A potential counter to these observations is the fact that spending on faculty and direct teaching support remains the single largest expenditure of the VSC system. Again, though, the fact that academics are the *sole stated mission* of VSC and its campuses indicates that this budget item should be overwhelmingly large. It may be tempting to reduce its size (primarily through a reduction in full-time faculty and/or an increase in their teaching load) because it is a relatively easy short-term “fix.” But the consequences for the quality of higher education (such as higher student-to-faculty ratios, over-enrolled courses, and under-prepared faculty as a result of a lack of academic research support) is traumatic.

The Tax Base

The State of Vermont often struggles to find revenue, especially in support of its laudable public policy goals. Demographic trends have been a key factor. The state’s retirement population is increasing, resulting in a projected 4% decline in *per capita* tax revenue by 2030. The economic shift from manufacturing that has occurred throughout the United States has been especially noticeable in Vermont, including within the rural parts of the state that have traditionally relied upon agriculture as, historically, the largest sector of the Vermont economy. Service sector employment has increased but not all Vermonters have felt its benefits and it has not always generated the anticipated level of revenue. Successive fiscal years have revealed budget shortfalls that need to be reconciled (especially as states are not constitutionally permitted to engage in Keynesian-style deficit spending), such as a \$70 million initial discrepancy between costs and revenue in 2019.

Nonetheless, compared with other states, Vermont's revenue base is not doing as badly as it might initially seem. In terms of higher education, though, its priorities have notably shifted. Several decades ago, the state devoted 15% of general fund revenues to higher education, compared with 2%, today. That decline reportedly was historically influenced (according to a former state legislator) by the way the general budget often presented higher education as a single line item, which magnified the amount spent by the state and, also, created the impression that it was "low-hanging fruit" when cuts were required.

Furthermore, the creation of a budgeting technique for higher education called the Vermont Model created an impression that the state was indirectly funding the state's higher education system by channeling money to low-income Vermonters through the Vermont State Assistance Corporation. While the policy was popular, it masked the decline in overall spending for higher education within the state, including in terms of students who applied their student loans to attend colleges and universities in other states. That relative decline has been drastic and has reached a tipping point in terms of the sustainability of the overall system. Even a very modest increase in higher education expenditure by the state would produce very noticeable, as well as highly constructive, results.

More concerning has been Vermont's relative lack of support for higher education when compared with other states, both in terms of overall support, *per capita* expenditure, and per student support. While just behind New Hampshire in this respect (\$2,695 to \$2,701 per student), it lags behind states such as Mississippi (\$7,357 per student) by a surprisingly wide margin, especially given Vermont's reputation for enlightened policy making among both Democrats and Republicans. Of course, an increase in expenditure on higher education may require a reordering of some public policy priorities. It also might be important to make a distinction between funding

VSC and funding the University of Vermont, given the different constituencies (such as a higher profile of elite students and as reflected by theoretical research agendas) that these institutions serve. Ultimately, even a partial and limited return to the higher rate of budgetary support from the state will be required for the system to succeed, if not survive, given the nature of its important and non-profit mission.

VSC campuses are frighteningly dependent upon tuition for their revenue. Even when factoring VSAC loans that are partially subsidized by the Vermont Model, that financial situation makes both the system and its students highly vulnerable in this respect. Greatly declining public support (especially at the state level but, also, including the federal level) is the most obvious variable in relation to this precarious fiscal situation. Granted, it is a truism of politics that it is much more difficult to restore lost spending than it is to cut current spending. But higher education in Vermont may be an exception to that rule. Not only have those levels become so low that it would be almost impossible to lower them, further, without eliminating them, entirely, but the public mood may have shifted in this respect. The Covid-19 pandemic and the economic shutdown that has been necessary for combatting it has heightened public awareness of the need for higher education to confront the highly damaging consequences (both economically and in terms of public engagement and civic duty) of these sorts of wide ranging events for individually-affected persons, their families, and society in general.

The Demographic Cliff

Arguably, the most daunting challenge for higher education in general (and, particularly for Vermont and its higher education institutions, given its overwhelming reliance upon tuition for funding them) has been a dramatic demographic shift in the school-aged population. Following the global economic crisis of 2008, the national birthrate (which already had been lower than it

had been in many previous years) severely declined in response. Couples deferred the decision to have children in response to the strong sense of economic and social uncertainty that this crisis revealed. By 2024-2026, the consequences of that shift in birthrate will be experienced in terms of children who are approaching the range of traditional-aged college students. Perhaps it will result in as much as a 15% decrease in that population, which may, coincidentally, be experienced, again, in another 18 years as couples may defer having children in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Vermont will, reportedly, be among the most affected states in this respect.

However, this situation also could be an example of the belief that every crisis also provides the source of an opportunity. The economic fallout of this pandemic and its loss of jobs will create a need for members of the workforce to seek new credentials and job skills. In particular, they will need both technical and scientific education (consistent with STEM disciplines) and the professional nimbleness provided by the humanities and social sciences, which specialize in a socially oriented approach to critical thinking and expression. Investment in learning platforms that facilitate the need for this non-traditional student cohort to be flexible in their approach to higher education underscores the requirement for the state to assist in providing that investment. That state assistance is needed not only for the benefit of Vermont's economically vulnerable citizens but, also, as a long-term strategy for enhancing job growth, wages, economic development, and increased future revenue.

The Historical Context of American Higher Education

Higher education has been essential to the well-being of the nation and the state throughout their existence. The founding of the University of Vermont [UVM] in the same year that Vermont became a state is a notable example of that foundational status. The VSC system was not formally

established until 1961 but some of the institutions that would comprise that system considerably predate VSC. The oldest of those units (which eventually became Castleton University) was established (though as a primary school) during the late 18th century, prior to even the founding of UVM. Other units were established during the early 18th century through the early 20th century.

Institutions of higher education were initially intended, primarily, for select members of the elite of society. The model that historically prevailed was the one established by institutions such as the University of Paris, which was grounded upon associations of faculty members who established their own credentials, voted upon curricular standards, and chose administrators to lead them. That model was adopted within the early United States, beginning with private sectarian colleges and universities. Eventually, public universities were established by the various American states to free faculty and students from sectarian influence (consistent with the principle of the separation of church and state) and to be educated for the purpose of advancing the public interest, as well as their own individual interests. The University of Vermont is one of the earliest examples of a public university founded by a state government.

The purpose of higher education in relation to the values of American society was the education and preparation of future leaders. Students were not trained for specific professions but were provided a strong, general background in the humanities. That emphasis was expanded to include those fields of study that would evolve into the social, natural, and physical sciences. However, preparation for a profession was left, for many decades, to professional associations or apprenticeship programs. Instead, the ideal graduate was one who had a critical mind, enhanced capacity for persuasive expression, and a thoughtful commitment to the advancement of society as a civilization. The intention was that their education would provide them with the intellectual facility to choose their own future in personal, professional, and civic terms.

That ideal was inspired and advanced by principles of modern republicanism. Students were instilled with a sense of civic duty and the curriculum was intended to guide them in developing a sense of civic virtue as well as an understanding and appreciation of their place within society. A more crude way of putting it was that they were being educated for the sake of being well-educated in a general sense. Colleges and universities were created to promote the common wealth and the general welfare of society. That spirit has not been entirely lost within American higher education.

The Creation and Expansion of State Systems

As the needs of the country evolved, the diversity of American higher education changed as well. One important innovation during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries was the emergence of small state colleges, especially within more rural regions. The Morrill Land Grant Acts (sponsored by United States Representative Justin Morrill of Vermont) funded institutions of agricultural and technical higher education that contributed to this expansion. As the American economy shifted from agriculture to manufacturing and commerce, these state colleges offered a bridge between farming communities and an expansive American environment. Students who graduated from these colleges often returned to their rural communities (sometimes as teachers, sometimes as local professionals) and became leaders of those communities, while other students exercised greater mobility and contributed to the urbanization of the country.

Despite their different size and varying constituencies, these institutions of higher education remained modeled on similar principles. Although they shifted toward offering an array of specialized major areas of studies (supported by departments of faculty members who developed a particular expertise in these disciplines), they continued the tradition of general education to produce well-rounded graduates capable of advanced critical thinking and expression. The mission

also retained the primary goal of producing elite citizens and not merely people prepared to pursue a parochial professional career. The structure of these institutions remained remarkably consistent, including a hierarchical arrangement of faculty leadership that included offices such as department chairs, deans of colleges, provosts, and presidents. Most importantly, the role of the faculty remained central and essential to higher education across all of its iterations.

The Creation and Development of the Vermont State College System

The system that eventually became VSC originated with independent colleges that, in certain cases, originated as secondary school academies, such as Castleton. The Vermont State College system was formally created in 1961 in response to a general desire to improve the overall offerings of higher education to Vermont residents. In 1970, the precursor to CCV was initiated and soon became affiliated with VSC. That system was relatively decentralized until 1977, when VSC's central administration created a more centralized and interconnected state college system.

That process included a consideration of the different strengths of the various campuses. For example, JSC gained a reputation for having a stronger liberal arts orientation while VTC obviously emphasized STEM-related disciplines. This relative specialization has helped to make each campus distinctive. Nonetheless, their respective curriculum requires the fulfillment of general education criteria, consistent with an accredited baccalaureate programs. Limited graduate offerings also have been available, as well as certificate programs and associate degrees, especially through CCV, which also provides opportunities for transfer to four-year campuses such as UVM and the other VSC campuses.

This aspect of VSC diverges, somewhat, from certain other state college systems in which separate campuses often are oriented toward different parts of their respective states, rather than emphasizing different disciplinary features. Organizationally, each campus tends to include the

executive and senior administrative capacity typically associated with stand-alone colleges and universities as well as the VSC administrative superstructure, culminating in the Chancellor. While that system is known within other state systems (and is inherited, indirectly, from historical developments of famous systems such as Oxford and Cambridge Universities), it is notable in terms of the relatively smaller size and funding associated with VSC.

Higher Education Faculty as Compared with Primary and Secondary Teachers

One of the most distinctive features of colleges and universities within education, overall, is the position, status, and role of the faculty. Unlike teachers at other levels of the overall educational system, the role of professors within its hierarchical structure is, traditionally, ubiquitous. It is not mere symbolism that all academic administrative positions (including a university president) conventionally are required to be appointed as tenured professors before being eligible to assume that senior or executive office. In fact, historical institutions of higher education frequently used the terms “university” and “faculty,” interchangeably.

Strong faculty governance is a traditional cornerstone of higher education. Professors develop an expertise in the governance and administration of a college or university through active participation in curriculum decisions, searches and appointments of faculty and administrative positions, policymaking, committee assignments, and other responsibilities. That experience makes it possible for them to assume administrative positions with more specific duties, often beginning with leadership of an academic program or chair of an academic department. Those experiences provide them with exposure to other aspects of executive administration, such as budget management, human resources, promotion and retention, public affairs, communication, and personnel supervision.

The tenure system is an essential feature of both the general roles and responsibilities of collegiate and university faculty as well as the governing structure of higher education. Tenure is an earned status that requires the approval of peers and other academic supervisors, following a rigorous process of evaluation that is determined by standards that the faculty largely create. Tenure is not an absolute guarantee of job security but a means of ensuring that professors who have proven their qualifications to a high degree cannot be arbitrarily terminated. Conventional wisdom has held that tenure protects the academic free speech of professors in relation to their teaching and research, such as a University of Iowa economics professor who wrote an article criticizing farm subsidies that drew the ire of the governor of that state. More importantly, though, it allows academic administrators to take a principled stance and disagree with their superiors and, should that action cost them their administrative position, it will not cost them their status and position as a professor.

Another important distinction is that faculty at the college and university level are teachers but the nature and source of their teaching is not grounded merely in conventional pedagogy and basic knowledge of a particular field or discipline. Ideally, good teaching at that level encourages students to draw upon the expertise of their professors and make critical connections on their own. It is essential, therefore, for good professors to maintain a program of scholarly research and writing that deepens their understanding of their fields as well as contributes to the accumulation of higher knowledge. Many students and other members of society often conceive of the higher education process as a glorified extension of high school. In fact, it is a much more sophisticated process in which scholarship and teaching interact to create a truly meaningful intellectual experience and, subsequently, produce graduates who are prepared for life and, potentially, multiple career paths as well as making truly useful contributions to society as citizens and leaders.

The fact that the armed forces require commissioned officers to be college or university graduates (generally regardless of their branch specialty except under certain specific circumstances, such as the Finance Corp) is a good indication of the real purpose and value of higher education. In this respect, the role of professors as both scholars and teachers is indispensable.

Ultimately, the experience of being a faculty member at the college and university level prepares professors for multiple roles. One of those roles is, potentially, an administrative one. Rather than a rarified specialization, the role of senior and executive administrators within this environment is a product of professional development. It includes the wisdom gained through the doctoral program as a terminal degree, the experience of participating in faculty governance, the intimate knowledge and understanding of the curriculum process as the central purpose of the institution, and the opportunities for more specific experience in positions of increasing scope.

Post-War Expansion and Administrative Professionalization

Despite this experience of faculty members within a college and university environment, a tendency toward specialization of academic administration at this level has become, increasingly, a trend that has displaced the traditional norm. As late as the middle of the 20th century, senior and executive administrators were, frequently, internally recruited for those positions directly from the ranks of the teaching faculty. An excellent example of this experience was Woodrow Wilson, who was selected to become president of Princeton University directly from being a professor with no intervening administrative experience.

However, the exponential expansion of student enrollments following the Second World War and the introduction of the GI Bill made the pursuit of administrative positions within academia a more consciously selected career path. Typically, faculty who pursued that goal would move, frequently, from one institution of higher education to the next one as they sought positions

of increasing responsibility and remuneration. Following the 1980s in particular, compensation for serving in these positions rose, dramatically (sometimes including substantial perks), emulating the corporate world in this respect. One former administrator once quipped that it was the best route for seeking an executive career without necessarily having to attend business school, earn an MBA, and climb the corporate ladder. The overall trend since the late 20th century has been that salaries and benefits for academic administrators have risen, exponentially, especially in comparison with faculty salaries, which have largely stagnated—as is the case within the VSC system in which pay raises for professors often have not kept pace with inflation.

Senior and executive administrators within the VSC system have received relatively modest compensation and benefits when compared with their counterparts at many other colleges and universities. Nonetheless, that experience has not been completely absent. Furthermore, the proliferation of administrative positions that also has characterized this trend within academia is not absent from the VSC system, as both organizational charts and statistical comparisons of budget and salary trends (as previously discussed) have indicated. It is a very serious and ongoing challenge for academia in general and VSC in particular.

Part II: Recommendations

All of these factors have been present and evident for years. They indicate that the challenges facing the Vermont State Colleges system are chronic, worsening, and will not change without dramatic intervention. While an important part of that intervention must involve the State of Vermont, its own limitations (especially fiscally) indicate that the state government cannot be the sole source of the solution. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation, gravely, but

it did not create the crisis. The solution requires imagination and a willingness to consider a different paradigm.

Part of the solution might be found within the lessons of the past, including the traditional structures and practices of higher education. Faculty *must* be at the center of this process and the recommendations that will result from it. Furthermore (and very importantly), they cannot be treated as part of a zero-sum game. A utilitarian approach is needed in which not only should the greatest good for the greatest number of people be sought but the least amount of pain (if any) should be the goal in reimagining the system. It may be a cliché but a crisis *can* contain within it a true opportunity. Not only can the VSC be restructured to avoid fiscal collapse but it can be reimagined to be more stable, balanced, and achieve a better academic ranking and reputation. It is an opportunity to make this educational system *truly better* for its students, faculty, staff, and Vermont society.

Administrative Restructuring

The creation of Northern Vermont University has provided an example of the benefits of consolidation within the VSC system. The evidence and situation strongly indicate that this model should be extended to encompass VSC as a whole. A “deep dive” into the budget numbers will be needed to provide a more detailed and accurate recommendation. This information is not always readily available so those officials who can assist in assembling it will be essential to this process. Nonetheless, for now, meaningful generalizations can be provided in this respect. Therefore, a strong and demonstrable outline for reform should be proffered and initiated.

Meanwhile, the state government *must* make a short-term commitment to facilitating this process, which will require a bridge period of a couple of years. The fiscal constraints upon the State of Vermont are real and difficult. Nonetheless, the temptation to seek solutions that can be

done “on the cheap” or by “throwing people under the bus” is an unfortunate feature of times of crisis. In addition to the unnecessary anxiety and harm it can produce, a too-rapid response can result in a phenomenon known as “panicky idiot syndrome” that can produce terrible proposals and even worse implementation. Also understandable (but highly counterproductive) is a desire to chase after ideas that might seem superficially attractive but are chimera, much like playing “whack-a-mole” with public policy. This crisis concerns the education of the people of this state, their future, the future of their children, and the long-term stability and common good (including economically) of Vermont.

One important note is timing. Despite the urgency of the present crisis, changes done in haste could be even more damaging to the system. While the problem requires immediate attention, a solution should be implemented in a way that inflicts the least amount of pain possible upon people who will be affected by it. While the needs of current students are paramount (for their sake and, also, because their experience will influence prospective students), the very real concerns of administrators, faculty, and staff must be considered with care and compassion. The careers and lives of people will be adversely affected by any substantive changes that are made. Those changes must be implemented in the most benign manner, possible. That consideration also underscores the need for a bridge period that happens to be consistent with the sort of best practices advocated by respected experts in this field, such as the American Association for University Professors.

Vermont State University

All of the constituent units of the Vermont State College System should be combined into a single university. This action would be similar to the merger of Johnson State College and Lyndon State College that resulted in the creation of Northern Vermont University. It would be different from that example, not only in scope but in the comprehensiveness of this consolidation.

It will require a rethinking of the way in which the mission of the system is delivered. These changes will include a restructuring of the administration, cooperation among academic programs, and a reorientation of the way in which the academy governs itself.

This action also will provide the opportunity for a rebranding that will alter public perceptions of these campuses and their missions. The new consolidated institution could be called Vermont State University or (if that name might be confusing in relation to UVM) it could be given another appropriate name such as, for example, Green Mountain State University. Its new institutional presence *must be* supported with *appropriate, aggressive, and sustained marketing* and the state government will need to be actively involved in that process as well as provide necessary funding for it. Each of the current VSC colleges and universities would become distinct campuses of the university and they would retain limited autonomy. Thus, for example, Northern Vermont University would be reestablished as Vermont State University at Johnson and Vermont State University at Lyndon while Vermont Technical College would become Vermont State University at Randolph—Technical College or Vermont State University at Williston—Satellite Campus, as the situation would dictate.

Centralized Senior and Executive Administration

The most conspicuous aspect and benefit of this consolidation would be the transfer of certain administrative functions from the separate campuses to a central university administration. That process would have particularly noticeable implications for senior and executive administrators within the system. Rather than a VSC Chancellor governing the system with the assistance of the current Council of Presidents, that office would be transformed into the President of the State University. The current arrangement of separate presidents and provosts would be

replaced by that office and a single provost for the entire university, communicating directly with campus deans.

Not all administrative functions should be completely removed from the campus level to a central university level. In particular, administration at the support level for various offices would need to be retained by the campuses to provide essential implementation, oversight, and liaison functions. But in terms of certain senior and executive positions, their presence on the various campuses would be made redundant. Most of these administrative functions would occur at the central level (perhaps physically remaining in Montpelier) while maintaining consistent communication through internet, phone, virtual means, and occasional site visits.

Ultimately, decisions made regarding most support functions would be made at the level of the president and appropriate vice-presidents and directors. It would include offices and positions such as Dean of Students, Dean of Administration, Dean of Admissions, Dean of Administration, Director of Human Relations (with Associate Directors at each campus), Director and Associate Director of Marketing, and the Dean of Resources. Decisions regarding curriculum development and maintenance, course scheduling, student life, faculty relations (including retention, tenure, and promotion), and on-site infrastructural maintenance should be made at the level of deans, associate deans, department chairs, and the faculty governance process as it is collaboratively deemed to be appropriate.

Decentralized and Autonomous Faculty Governance

The role of the campus dean is a critical aspect of this restructuring. Its arrangement would be inspired by the original conception of that office of faculty governance, extending back through the 19th century and beyond. As previously mentioned, senior and executive administrative positions within colleges and universities must, also, qualify to be tenured members of the faculty.

While some of the most senior positions within academia have required more extensive experience and specialized knowledge than was required prior to the mid-20th century, even they, typically, continue to be the product of “on the job training” for people who began their careers as professors. The need for specialization is much greater for positions involved with admissions, marketing, legal affairs, and human resources. But general oversight continues to be a function of advanced degrees in various academic fields combined with experience gained through ongoing participation within various facets of faculty governance.

Therefore, the administration of each campus should be delegated to deans and associate deans, relying upon oversight and technical expertise from the level of the university president, provost, and staff. Furthermore, these senior administrators *should be selected from among the ranks of the tenured faculty members of each campus*, just as they are for the position of department chair. Rather than engaging in the expensive process of searching for, and selecting, external candidates (which has contributed to salary inflation in this area), tenured faculty members should serve in these positions on a progressive, rotating basis—perhaps for three-year, renewable terms. Instead of a distinct salary for serving in these positions, they should be paid their current salary as professors or associate professors (extended from nine to twelve-month contracts) with an additional stipend in recognition of their additional responsibilities. These administrators also would be encouraged to continue teaching (though on a substantially reduced course load) and professorial colleagues and/or adjunct faculty members would cover courses that they are not able to teach during this period.

Because this path to leadership would be progressive, professors typically would become eligible by rotating through lower positions such as department chair and proceed through associate dean to dean, thus gaining the requisite experience along the way. Not all professor would

desire this experience nor would they necessarily need to “take a turn” but they would treat the experience as part of the normal service that they perform as part of their contractual duties (which are already specified for them) as tenure-track and tenured faculty members. It is possible that some persons who have served in these positions might seek similar or higher administrative opportunities at other universities. In such cases, the departure of a dean could be accommodated with the internal selection of a new dean from the ranks of professors with experience as department chairs and/or as associate deans and the hiring of a new tenure-track assistant professor at a starting salary that likely will be less than the salary of the departing dean/professor.

Currently, the average VSC senior administrative salary (as of 2018) is approximately \$110,000. The average nine-month salary of a full professor is approximately \$62,000—neither of these salaries include the calculation of benefits. When adjusted for extension to a twelve-month contract and with the addition of an appropriate stipend, that salary still is considerably less than the average senior administrative salary. When the fact that this approach negates the need to search for, and hire, new external personnel, those cost savings become more apparent, even when not taking into account other savings from campus and infrastructure consolidation.

An additional important point is transition. First, any effort of this nature requires time for planning, preparation, implementation, and adjustment. Second (as previously stressed), many positions will be eliminated from this sort of plan—more than can be accounted by using the currently available organizational and budgetary information. This process will harm people (especially ones in current senior and executive administrative positions) who will lose their jobs and, potentially, their long-term careers. That fact should not be dismissed, lightly. A reasonable transitional period also is necessary for dealing with this human cost. Third, current and prospective students will need time to adjust to these changes, even if they are largely structural

and do not directly affect them or their academic programs. Therefore, a transition period of two years is, again, highly recommended as well as professional counseling support for those persons who will be affected. The state government will need to support that transition so it can be implemented, smoothly and effectively.

Curricular Restructuring

All of the current academic programs at VSC campuses should be continued with no disruption and, ideally, additional resources. Therefore, at a minimum, faculty positions should not be reduced or, otherwise, adversely affected, including in terms of compensation. As other studies have demonstrated, compensation for full-time faculty within the VSC system is lower than it is for comparable institutions, even when not adjusting for the higher cost of living that often exists within Vermont. *Retaining high quality faculty and enhancing their skills and working conditions is central to the VSC mission statement and it must not be eroded, further.*

The academic reputation and ranking of a Vermont State University will be of paramount importance to its future. Overreliance upon increasing teaching loads, employing more adjunct instructors, and eliminating courses and programs through strategic culling of the curriculum will not improve the way in which prospective students perceive the academic institution. Hiring new full-time faculty probably will not be feasible in the short-run. But the system needs to anticipate making improvements in these areas during the next several years. Meanwhile, there are current strengths that can be supported and changes in approach that need to be part of this process.

Campus Specialization

The VSC system has emphasized different academic divisions and disciplines within different colleges and universities of the system. That strategy has an elegant logic to it. VTC obviously has a strong STEM niche while JSC has a reputation for emphasizing strong liberal arts. Certain programs at these campuses have earned laudable reputations, such as the Castleton's Department of Media and Communication. Students enrolling at Vermont State University can be directed to the campus that will best serve their interests and needs in this respect with the different campuses each reinforcing their own strengths.

However, general education requirements must be maintained so access to a wide array of disciplines cannot be entirely ignored. One strategy will be for the different campuses to continue pooling programmatic resources. Students may need to take a particular course at one campus while in residence at another one. Facilitating that strategy will require a sustained commitment to distance education as well as to strategic planning within the faculty governance system. Innovation among faculty members also will need to be encouraged and collaboration facilitated, again in recognition of the wider mission that professors have as teachers, scholars, and co-governors of their respective institutions and the university as a whole.

Distance Education

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced academic institutions to become much more adept at offering distance-learning platforms. Many professors (especially more established ones) have been highly skeptical of online learning. Part of that skepticism has been concern that it is “just another fad” that administrators have pursued in the interest of maximizing revenue. Other professors have balked at a perception that they will be forced to abandon the traditional classroom

environment, while still others chafe at the thought of students being allowed to take courses under lax conditions. The advent and poor reputations (frequently deserved) of for-profit universities that have relied upon the exploitation of teaching employees has reinforced that perception.

However, recent experience has demonstrated that high-quality higher education is possible in an online environment, as a 2011 report by the federal Department of Education [DOE] strongly indicated when it found that the performance of students within online courses often outpaced the performance of their fellow students within the a traditional version of the same courses. It must be stressed, of course, that no single approach should be used as an exclusive alternative. Many students are much more comfortable within a traditional teaching environment. Furthermore, the attraction of the physical campuses of this system is a powerful inducement for prospective students.

In addition to traditional and online courses, hybrid courses (which contain both online and classroom-based content) have proven to be even more highly effective for student learning, according to that same 2011 DOE report. Furthermore, distance learning is not confined to asynchronistic online courses. Distance learning classrooms held with a professor and some students in one classroom and other students at other sites is highly effective as well. In fact, all of these options will be important for the ongoing success of a Vermont State University. Students who need a particular course that is only offered at a different campus will benefit from that flexibility and professors who prefer traditional classroom teaching can facilitate that need by using synchronistic distance-learning classrooms.

Indeed, the institutions of the VSC system already are engaged in developing and offering these alternatives. A more collaborative and consolidated university will require them, even more strongly. The central administration, in cooperation with the state government, must ensure that

this effort is well funded and supported. Despite the focus upon the present crisis, this opportunity must be directed toward the future success of the university as well.

Non-Traditional Students

The demographic cliff is an especially daunting challenge for all institutions of higher education but especially for smaller and regional systems such as VSC, which is strongly dependent upon tuition revenue. That trend focuses upon traditional-aged students. Another, often overlooked constituency is non-traditional students. Given the severe effect of the Covid-19 pandemic upon the state and national economies, many businesses will close and many professions that were already declining may disappear. Therefore, these workers need to “reinvent themselves” and higher education is one of the best resources for that purpose.

A Vermont State University can target these potential students in numerous ways. It can develop new programs that include skills-based courses oriented toward current and future growth sectors of the economy. It also can give these students one thing that they typically require—flexibility. The previous discussion concerning distance learning is part of that strategy. Marketing these advantages for non-traditional students will be essential for this purpose. If the downturn in enrollment is to be countered, successfully, non-traditional students must be a prominent part of that admission strategy and the curriculum development provided by the faculty.

Certificate Programs

A particularly attractive alternative to a traditional baccalaureate degree is the certificate program at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. VSC colleges and universities already offer these sorts of programs. More of them will be needed, especially, again, to attract non-traditional students who are seeking a mid-career alternative.

NVU's Center for Professional Studies is an excellent example of putting this sort of strategy into effect. Its certificate offerings address many of the concerns that have been mentioned, especially regarding non-traditional students. But this effort should be joined by other schools and departments within the system. Even non-professional certificates, carved from the curriculum of programs and disciplines that already exist, can be attractive and be provided with little or no additional expenditure. Faculty should be further encouraged to conceive and submit these ideas and the faculty governance system should give them not only serious consideration but streamlined approval, depending upon the circumstances and availability of resources.

Community College of Vermont

This report has not devoted much specific attention to the role of CCV in this process. The single most relevant reason for that omission has been the fact that CCV appears to have been functioning, relatively well, throughout this crisis. Additionally, its mission is somewhat different from the other units of the VSC system so it does not necessarily fit into this scheme, neatly. Nonetheless, CCV would be an essential part of a Vermont State University, emulating similar schools that exist within larger universities and which contribute, strongly, to their higher education missions.

CCV should continue to provide a two-pronged subset mission: 1) as a community college that offers associate degrees, certificates, and targeted individual courses; 2) as a feeder system for the rest of the VSC system as well as UVM. Despite its success, it (like all such institutions) could be improved. In particular, administrative relationships between its senior administrators and the rest of the system could be more closely integrated through direct participation in relevant aspects

of the faculty governance system. Also, it could be made a more conscious part of the short-term and long-term planning of campus deans as well as the executive administration.

In that sense, CCV would become a semi-autonomous college within a Vermont State University. In that role, it could serve as a place for provisionally admitted students to earn some of their general education as they become more fully prepared for the collegiate experience. However, any such closer collaboration will require an additional study and much more careful and critical assessment. Meanwhile, making CCV part of the organizational chart of a consolidated university will signal its importance to the overall system and facilitate future integration and closer relationships.

Conclusion

As already stated, the crisis facing VSC is, also, an opportunity. Rather than merely trying to ensure that the constituent colleges and universities are able to “limp along” for the time being, this planning can produce a vibrant and exciting institution of higher education. Its scope and quality can be expanded, even within the strict fiscal boundaries and straightened circumstances in which it currently finds itself and will probably need to face for the immediate future.

But that future can be exceedingly bright. Drawing upon the lessons of the past indicate that a return to honored traditions of decentralized daily administration, centralized coordination, and strong faculty governance can vastly improve the prospects for higher education within Vermont. However, the state government absolutely needs to provide additional support—50th place for a state with such a proud tradition of enlightened learning is not acceptable. If this sort of bold thinking is embraced with enthusiasm instead of apprehension, tremendous success surely can be achieved.

Part III: Enumerated Recommendations

1. The Vermont State College System [VSC] will be succeeded by a single university to be named Vermont State University, Green Mountain State University, or some other appropriate and marketable name.
2. The VSC Chancellor will be succeeded by the office of President of this new university and the Dean of Academic Affairs will be succeeded by the office of Provost for the entire university.
3. Senior and Executive offices at the various campuses of this new university will be consolidated at the centralized level of the university President, located in Montpelier, which is appropriate for a student body of that size of approximately 6,000 students.
4. This restructuring will result in a state university (for this illustrative purpose, using the acronym VSU) with the following campuses: VSU at Castleton, VSU at Johnson, VSU at Lyndon, VSU at Randolph—Technical College, VSU at Winooski—Satellite Campus, Community College of Vermont [CCV].
5. Each of these campuses will be led by a dean and a number of associate deans to be determined according to the size and specific needs of the campus.
6. Each dean, associate dean, and department chair will be selected from among the ranks of the tenured faculty to serve three-year renewable terms, receiving (in addition to a 12-month extension of their current professorial salary) an appropriate stipend and negotiated course release and the provision of other faculty to cover their respective courses.
7. Faculty governance will be reinforced, particularly in terms of faculty decision making relating to curriculum and the retention, tenure, and promotion of their colleagues as well

as having an appropriate input into important decisions concerning the welfare and future of the university.

8. Further integration of CCV as a semi-autonomous college of this university will be determined through future assessment and discussion but it will continue its mission of providing associate degrees, certificates, and facilitating transfer to the university's baccalaureate programs.
9. Innovation in curriculum development, distance learning, attracting non-traditional students, and improvements to student-to-full-time (tenure track) faculty ratios will be actively supported by the state government and the university.
10. The State of Vermont will commit to increasing its funding of the system, consistent with the levels set by other states regarding their respective state college and university systems.
11. This transition will be conducted over a two-year timeframe and any person adversely affected by it will be provided with appropriate professional counseling and support. During this timeframe, the State of Vermont will provide stopgap funding to ensure the ongoing mission of the VSC system.
12. An analysis of the effect of this university and its campuses on the local and regional economies of the relevant Vermont communities will be conducted as part of this process.