

Proposal to Restructure the VSCS and an Action Plan for NVU

As a follow-up to our Vision Statement, VSCS Thrive submits the proposal below as a recommendation for restructuring the VSC and for a specific reimagining of academic programming for NVU. We offer these recommendations based upon decades of experience and commitment of faculty, staff, students, alumni, and community members, all of whom have been deeply involved in the work “on the ground,” especially in Lyndon and Johnson. In particular, we have been struck by the calls for transformation and transition to a new twenty-first-century educational model, while the bulk of current proposals and recommendations (from NVU Strong and most notably the VSCS Forward task force) have simply continued and deepened the trajectory that the VSCS has followed for the past twenty years. We are suggesting here that the VSCS actually do something quite different and truly transformational given the current crisis, which has been long in the making, as well as the opportunities that this crisis presents.

VSC Restructuring

There have been a variety of recommendations pertaining to a reorganization of the VSC, primarily considering centralization and consolidation. But that has, in fact, been the trajectory the VSC established twenty years ago when Bob Clarke became chancellor. Clarke not only established a unitary focus on workforce development, given his background at VTC and his interest in “partnering” with businesses, but also set in motion a number of initiatives and efforts to eliminate “redundancies” in programs and to reduce the individuality of each of the institutions. That effort to centralize and consolidate (in the name of efficiencies that never really materialized) was furthered by subsequent chancellors, resulting ultimately in the “consolidation” proposed by Jeb Spaulding to eliminate three campuses. The results of centralization and consolidation, particularly since the central office and the board have been divorced from the individuality and unique value of the colleges, clearly have not paid off. It has been said that the VSC (and NVU specifically) can no longer be all things to all people. However, it is far more important to understand that the VSC must not be *one* thing to all people! We suggest, then, a fundamental reorganization that will allow for revitalizing and invigorating each of the VSC institutions.

- Eliminate the physical central office (in Montpelier), siting central office functions at one or more of the campuses. Lyndon, for example, has under-utilized space in the Rita Bole Center which could serve well for certain system-wide functions such as payroll.
- Various central office functions could be parceled out to various campuses and supported by a central office budget.
- Support central office functions with separate state appropriations. Rather than, as with the current model, reducing state funds that would be best used educating students directly, the central office budget would be a separate, justified request designed to facilitate the functions required by or best overseen by a central office—payroll, legal, auditing, system-wide IT, and the like. The funds self-allocated to the central office, at the expense of the colleges, have increased far in excess of funding for the colleges’ educational missions. Creating a separately funded budget for the central office, justified by the central office to the legislature, would alleviate that very significant problem.
- Eliminate the position of chancellor, substituting the existing Council of Presidents for system-wide decisions (such as maintaining justified unique programs to eliminate inter-college competition). Use the “strong president” model, rotating presidents for chair of the Council on a two- or three-year basis.
- Create a VSC commission to determine the best way to reduce the cost of administration. The commission must avoid being “top heavy” with administrators who will seek ways to

maintain administrative size and scope. The commission should represent a full spectrum of stakeholders from educators to community members, and a proportional, limited number of experienced college administrators.

- Reconstitute the Board of Trustees for better geographic representation and commitment to a vital range of educational opportunities for all Vermonters.
- Maintain separate accreditations for each VSC institution, with separate presidents, marketing teams, admissions teams, and faculty assemblies determining individual curricula for each college. Ensure transparent transfer and easy access to all VSC institutions for individual students, but maintain the individual character and marketability of each institution. While there may be some value in a system-wide marketing approach, only the individual colleges truly know what makes each college special and valuable to prospective students.
- Establish system-wide promotion, perhaps with a name change (Vermont State University at Castleton, or at Lyndon, or at Johnson; Vermont State Technical College) to help raise awareness of the value of the colleges in Vermont, but allow the individual schools to retain their distinctive character, focus, and mission. Site CCV at each of the campuses to further integrate a system of five strong colleges, which would provide superior physical space for CCV and present a clear, tangible pathway from a two-year CCV degree to a four-year degree at the same campus.
- Establish an equitable process for allocating state appropriations to each institution, perhaps by creating a per-student allocation formula (which would, of course, differ for CCV and the campus colleges, which support more infrastructure). Per-student funding could also be directly tied to tuition reductions for Vermont students to demonstrate the efforts of the state and the system to ensure an affordable and accessible educational experience for the Vermont students we serve.

Specific Proposal to Reinvigorate and Reimagine NVU

Just as we have been concerned by the continuation of the trajectory for centralization and consolidation in the VSCS as a whole, we are concerned by the continuation of the trajectory toward workforce development alone at NVU, first manifested in what has happened at Lyndon beginning with Carol Moore's tenure and is now projected for Johnson primarily in the NVU Strong Committee recommendations. We want to stress that there is nothing wrong with workforce development, and both CCV and VTC have a long history of very successful workforce development. Lyndon likewise has moved significantly in that direction, despite its origins as a teachers' college and a liberal arts institution. We are not suggesting abandoning workforce development as a vital part of the institution, especially as many of our programs are already deeply imbedded in the working community not only through internships but also because so many of our students are already working members of the community. However, to further reduce Lyndon and Johnson to workforce development alone is ultimately destructive of the vitality and viability of the colleges given the well-documented shift by businesses across the country to hiring college graduates with considerably more broad-based educations and the desire of students for such expansive education.

Moreover, we are concerned that our publicly funded institutions will be even more directed toward supporting, not only through unpaid labor but also through providing space, facilities and infrastructure for private enterprise. There is no question that the colleges will continue to work with and on behalf of business where both students and businesses benefit. However, we believe that our mission and our purpose are best realized by investing public funds in supporting public institutions (both state agencies and non-profits) and the community at large. We are proposing to adapt what is especially valuable in the NVU Strong recommendations—fully integrating

community institutions with the campus life by housing those institutions on campus and integrating them into academic programs. But we are suggesting that this not be limited to workforce development alone and instead expand and enlarge the focus and opportunities available to our students and communities.

We recognize that the students of today and tomorrow are qualitatively different from previous generations of students. We assert that the quality and breadth of education an institution delivers will be more important than ever—socially significant as we navigate conflict and unrest but also practically important to the sustainability of universities as the first waves of second-generation student loan debtors, likely to be more cautious and suspicious of acquiring student loan debt themselves, approach college age. With a focus on intensive, personalized instruction, NVU and the VSC can demonstrate their authenticity and commitment to quality thereby attracting students who have been turned off by pandemic on-line education and the high cost of tuition.

Many academic, business, and community leaders assert that the future will rely on us capturing the value of SHAPE disciplines themselves (Social Science, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy), as well as how such disciplines complement and work with STEM fields (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) to create a healthy and functioning future. The extraordinary times we are experiencing show us just how crucial SHAPE subjects are in understanding our communities and their interconnectedness, creating functional and ethical economies, learning from our past and applying this to our future, and realizing the need for a sustainable, healthy environment while effectively communicating for change.

A SHAPE education at NVU will provide students with the education they are searching for and empower them to make the changes in the world they seek—engagement in the world they are actively shaping. A SHAPE education recognizes that the youth of today desire more out of schooling than on-line vocational training. The students of today and tomorrow have demonstrated their willingness to speak out against inequalities, sparking and leading social and environmental justice movements—locally here in Vermont and globally. What’s more, business has recognized the value of hiring graduates of more expansive degree programs such as those in the liberal arts, and those graduates are now sought after in larger numbers than any other discipline.

Through implementation of SHAPE and MESH (Media literacy, Ethics, Sociology, and History), to be offered alongside STEM, NVU can revitalize and expand their offerings, attracting a wider breadth of students including those from out-of-state who significantly enhance revenues and help grow the population of young working people in Vermont. The revitalization of the social sciences and humanities, which have been cut back to the point of irrelevancy at the NVU campuses, will allow the faculty to create current, relevant, interdisciplinary degree concentrations and/or certificates that will complement and update traditional humanities and social science curricula and prepare students for creatively solving the problems of the future. A fine example of this is the Restorative Justice concentration, located in NVU Lyndon’s Criminal Justice program—the first of its kind in the nation and one that speaks clearly to the people protesting all over the country, demanding criminal justice reform. These students of today and tomorrow will be looking for ways to shape the future of this country and world through their social justice lens—we must have the degrees and opportunities they seek.

Action Plan:

- Commit to SHAPE and MESH education at the campuses—ensuring full-time faculty in Sociology, History, Political Science, English, and Philosophy and making those full degrees remain available to attract the widest breadth of students and to avoid hampering

students' opportunities upon graduation. Allow and encourage students to declare double majors.

- Create new concentrations and certificates through interdisciplinary offerings of SHAPE and MESH. Examples: International Justice Studies, Social Justice Studies, Community Development, Gender Studies, Race and Ethnicity Studies, Cultural Studies, Policy and Social Change, Peace Studies, Environmental Justice, and many others. Encourage students to stack credentials while pursuing their traditional degree.
- Use existing under-utilized space at each NVU campus to create a Social Justice Center with interdisciplinary divisions to be led and championed by faculty—students will participate in research, advocacy, and hands-on skill building while creating and collaborating on community-based projects. For example (a few of many):
 - Restorative Justice Hub
 - Division of Democratic Engagement
 - Division of Sustainability
 - Division of Social Justice
- Students will work with the NVU Social Justice Center to develop, organize, and complete a community-based project. For some divisions, the Center may act as a community hub, bringing people, especially young people, on to the NVU Campus. We would recommend the hire of one part-time or full-time employee who may develop ideas for the faculty/student projects, will work directly with members of the community, and who can aid in grant work, when possible.
- Market and advertise the campuses and their specific programs; be wary of marketing programs as wholly on-line without marketing their campus-based counterparts as that may deter students from seeking out more information if they perceive the program to be “only” on-line.
- There are many possible community-centric opportunities for development:
 - Sustainability Studies, particularly with an agricultural focus, using natural-science facilities and faculty as well as open land at the campuses
 - Human Services programs, working in tandem with state agencies (as is already done with Psychology and Human Services); establish safe-space programs, partnering with organization such as Umbrella in St. Johnsbury, to securely house and support victims of abuse and family instability; partner with local restorative justice centers (housed on campus) to facilitate the deeper learning for Criminal Justice students
 - Education Initiatives, particularly for early childhood education, using facilities, faculty, and students in elementary education programs at both campuses and establishing daycare and childcare facilities on campus to serve the community and faculty and staff at the college

Nothing in these recommendations excludes integrating academic programs with private enterprise, especially with such programs as Business Administration or, say, Mountain Recreation, which already work with the local ski areas and other private enterprise. But the opportunities and arrangement for sharing campus space would be focused more deliberately on public enterprise and community service, which is, frankly, a better use of public funds.

Establishing such programs would certainly require an investment in the colleges beyond the minimal funding now provided by the legislature. But such an investment that supports both Vermont students and the public needs of the community is both more easily justified and provides a better return on investment in the long run. The liberal arts programs that would provide the transformative educational opportunities to fully develop and implement such a

valuable community-centered institutions have been cut beyond the bone at NVU, both Lyndon and Johnson, and they would need reinvestment and reinvigoration. But those programs would certainly draw students to NVU—students we have lost over the years by too exclusive a focus on workforce development alone.

We have been living by the cliché that students want to go to college only to get a job, but the reality is that such an exclusive focus on job-training has been a significant part of the decline of enrollments at the VSC institutions. Too many Vermont students leave the state for more affordable and more expansive educational opportunities. We need to attract those Vermont students to Vermont colleges by making college more affordable through increasing funding to lower tuition and by making available the kind of fully developed, transformational educational opportunities for which this new generation of students is truly looking.