

## **VSCS Thrive! Rebuttal to NVU Strong Committee Proposal**

June 26, 2020

The summary of the NVU Strong Committee's recommendations to President Collins provided to the faculty via email on June 12 appears to revolve around one central objective: to "pivot in the direction of a Work College." That recommendation appears to be aimed at eventually obtaining the federal designation in order to, first, acquire federal funding and, second, to provide a marketing angle for the college. While there is nothing inherently problematic about the Work College idea (particularly as it is articulated by the Work Colleges Consortium), the way that the following recommendations flesh out that proposal clearly suggests that the reality of that trajectory for NVU is simply following the path that we have been on for the past two decades: narrowing the focus of the institution toward jobs training rather than the comprehensive education that would truly serve the needs of students first and the community (including employers) second. This proposal is little more than an attempt to recast a jobs-training "mission" in a new way and is merely tinkering around the edges of the central problem.

The fundamental issue here is that marketing as a Work College will not succeed without the substance of a liberal arts mission that can also be marketed; that is not currently the case and will not be with the rest of this proposal. So we will be further narrowing our marketing to a smaller and smaller audience, which we have been doing for the past twenty years. We cannot afford to continue on that trajectory. We also have (at Johnson) the designation of the premier public liberal arts college in Vermont, which we have yet to capitalize on and, at the same time, have undermined by cutting liberal arts programs and courses beyond the bone.

Moreover, we have simply not allowed the previous consolidation to work yet. How can we say whether it's a success or a failure without giving it time to show any results whatsoever? We need to refocus attention on rebuilding and renovating in order to take advantage of the current economic downturn, which will certainly redirect many students (Vermont and out-of-state) from existing private liberal arts colleges to less-expensive alternatives in the public realm.

We are, unfortunately, not cost competitive, and we must focus on restoring funding to drive down tuition and to market our strengths as comprehensive colleges, not as job-training institutions. It would be far more effective to look toward federal changes in relieving student debt and making public and community colleges either free or subsidized, as opposed to looking toward federal funds as a Work College. Both are gambles, of course, but the changes proposed below will work against reaching a work-college designation, whereas serving a broader community audience will put us in a position to take advantage of whatever happens at the federal level for "free college" and student-debt relief.

Simply continuing to follow the practices of the past two decades in narrowing and cutting will not solve anything. We have approached a revenue problem as a cost one, from the Chancellor and BoT on down, and that approach has clearly not served anyone well. It is time for real change—and that real change is to pivot in the direction of anticipating and furthering the effects of significant public pressure for saving the VSC and legislative awareness of the value of the colleges "for the benefit of Vermont"—all of Vermont, not just prospective employers.

NVU Strong Committee Proposal	Rebuttal
<p>From Alan Giese, Natural Sciences Faculty, Lyndon, as spokesperson for faculty on the committee: Dear NVU Faculty,</p> <p>We are writing today to share the work of the NVU Strong Advisory Committee in greater detail than we were able to do during our Zoom updates with faculty by school.</p> <p>First, thank you to all who were able to attend our Zoom sessions. We appreciated the opportunity to share a quick overview of the Committee's work, and we valued the opportunity to hear your reactions and input. Our primary goal was to hear from you, so we tried to keep our own comments brief during those calls. With that in mind, a fuller summary of the Committee's work is listed below.</p> <p><b>From the NVU Strong Advisory Committee to President Collins; suggested recommendations for moving toward a sustainable and vibrant institution of higher education:</b></p>	<p>While there is nothing inherently wrong with working toward inclusion in the Work Colleges Consortium, particularly as a way to reduce tuition cost and debt for students, the proposals expressed herein do not appear to aim toward the essential quality of a work college. ("Work Colleges are an exceptional group of four-year, degree granting, liberal arts institutions that engage students in the purposeful integration of work, learning, and service. Unique to work colleges is the requirement that all resident students participate in a comprehensive-work-learning service program for all four years of enrollment.") In particular, reducing general education to competency measures, instead of actual education, and farming it out to CCV would make it difficult to maintain the pretense of a liberal arts college. Moreover, the "work-learning-service" requirement of a federally designated work college requires all resident students, including at least one half of all full-time students" to work at least 80 hours per enrollment period, as opposed to simply a "full semester" working with a partner organization instead of taking classes." That model, which we already have in internship requirements, is a matter of job-training specifically, as opposed to liberal arts education, the core of a Work College.</p>
<p>1) Pivot in the direction of a Work College. Work College is a federal designation that, if achieved, would come with federal financial support. There are 9 such colleges at present, all private. A Work College is not an attainable goal for NVU in the short term, but we can adapt what we do to move in that direction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excess capacity on campus would be offered to outside businesses, state or local agencies, or not-for-profits.</li> <li>• Students would spend a full semester learning by working with a partner organization, either one house on campus, or one not, depending on the discipline and the student. Students would be working with a partner instead of taking classes, and earning tuition credits instead of earning a paycheck.</li> <li>• Faculty would function as guides and mentors by determining learning outcomes, building and maintaining relationships, and assessing student progress.</li> <li>• Work with partners to constantly align curriculum with industry needs.</li> </ul>	<p>While there are advantages to housing external partners on campus, particularly for providing work placements for students, outsourcing actual education, while not surprising as a business model, is not what the VSC institutions should be doing to meet their missions. Besides, the one entity that could use the excess space without significant retooling and investment is CCV, which is not listed as a potential occupant.</p> <p>The internship program that currently exists at NVU already functions with faculty serving as guides and mentors (and the rest); if the proposal is to make all courses work by "outsourcing," it is not acceptable, and if it is merely to market what we are already doing, it's not a "transformation."</p> <p>Not only does the college already work with industry to align curriculum to serve needs, but to push further in that direction is merely to follow the trajectory that was established as far back as 1999 to serve business interests rather than student interests and to market the college as a workforce-development tool. That trajectory has taken us to exactly where we stand now, as we have lost a significant population of students seeking a real college experience by focusing solely on selling students and their parents on college as a career booster, not an education.</p>

<p>2) Modify the GEU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create GE competencies rather than courses.</li> <li>• Integrate competencies into coursework or work-learn partnerships as appropriate (investigate the Bologna Process for 3-yr bachelor degrees that leverage an integrated GEU)</li> <li>• Create a first-year "basic career skills" certificate that would be part of the GEU.</li> <li>• Create a flexible GEU that would be universal across the VSCS, and delivered in large part by CCV.</li> <li>• Market the GEU with a focus on career readiness.</li> </ul>	<p>To modify the GEU as described is merely to market the college as a “basic career skills” factory, which will simply further narrow the potential student body. The assessment of GEU competencies would work no better than the graduation competencies already established, and we all know they are essentially meaningless. General education is frankly not a substitute for liberal arts education, but it should at least be an educational foundation for a bachelor’s degree. And that means it should be an education, not a measurement. The actual Bologna Process articulating three-year bachelor’s degrees assumes a two-stage (or three-stage) process that leads from bachelor’s to master’s degrees at least. That allows for a more extensive comprehensive education at the bachelor’s level with more specialized study in the second phase. That is not even close to what is being suggested here, which is gutting the core of general education and, hence, of education itself. To reduce a college education to merely a credential to signify career skills for hiring is to fail not only the mission of the VSC but the nature and purpose of education as a whole.</p> <p>Moreover, most of the existing GEU courses serve as foundational courses for the departments and majors that host them and as necessary foundational courses for the broad education our students deserve.</p>
<p>3) Accelerate unification, consolidate programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Based on analysis of program metrics, selected programs would be consolidated to one campus or the other.</li> </ul>	<p>Some consolidation of duplicate specialized programs would be reasonable, but to eliminate liberal arts programs at one campus in favor of another, as is already happening, would certainly violate the spirit and the purpose of any Work College designation, not to mention the mission of the VSC to fully integrate professional, liberal, and career study, consistent with student aspirations and regional and state needs.</p>
<p>4) Develop graduate programs, without adding direct operational expense</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain and enhance current support for graduate programs, including the Office of Graduate Studies</li> <li>• Support the proposal to form an NVU Graduate Division</li> <li>• Establish a Graduate Program Development Team with Faculty &amp; Staff</li> <li>• Establish an Institute for Applied Inquiry as a research branch of the university, particularly to study the work-learning model</li> <li>• Develop an Educational Specialist in Practitioner Scholarship and an MA Creative Inquiry through the Institute</li> </ul>	<p>Developing graduate programs is a worthy endeavor, but to try to do so while also reducing undergraduate program offerings will result only in failure. Without sufficient faculty sustained by undergraduate courses and programs, providing graduate programs will be impossible. If the idea is to follow the Bologna Process principles in particular, there will need to be an investment in the bachelor’s degree programs to feed the second stage of master’s programs (as in 3+2 or 4+1 sequences). Graduate programs are certainly a potential area for growth and increased enrollment, but they will not be produced out of thin air. The existing Master of Arts in</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Credit Count as a Metric for Graduate programs instead of Head Count</li> <li>• Diversify the Graduate Portfolio with new degree and certificate programs.</li> </ul>	<p>Liberal Studies, a flexibly designed umbrella program designed to serve local educators and others in multiple disciplines, is unable to deliver sustained programming due to a scarcity of faculty, recruitment, and investment. And there are already plenty of certificate programs that have been largely ignored and underutilized.</p>
<p>5) Move NVU Online into Academic Affairs</p>	<p>NVU online and any remote learning initiative must be seen as an “add-on” delivery model, not as a substitute.</p>
<p>6) Build out capacity for lifelong learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand the early college programs to reach more HS students.</li> <li>• Create curriculum with stackable certificates so that students pass celebrated milestones during their growth, and so that early- or mid-career professionals could return for additional training.</li> <li>• Consider a 4 x certificates = 1 A.S. approach.</li> <li>• Create enrichment programs for those late-career and retired.</li> </ul>	<p>This is all reasonable, but the mechanism to accomplish much of this is a much better integration of CCV with the campuses, not only to use the existing excess space but also to provide a clear, immediate, viable, and easy pathway for CCV students to transition from a two-year degree program to a four-year program. That can begin by siting CCV at the campuses, which is crucial to establishing a visible, tangible pathway for students. And it is impossible to “build out capacity for life-long learning” while also reducing the scope, focus, and offerings of the institution.</p>
<p>7) Forward these recommendations to the VSCS Forward Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One accreditation model</li> <li>• System-wide core curriculum/competencies</li> <li>• VSAC portability</li> <li>• UVM collaboration (with a statement that we do not support including the VSCS within the governance of UVM as our access missions are very different)</li> <li>• Decentralize/reduce the Office of the Chancellor</li> <li>• Appropriations formula</li> <li>• Initiate conversation with Unions regarding employee wages and benefits issues</li> <li>• Additional telepresence or telepresence-like technology</li> <li>• Academic calendar – explore the notion of a year-round calendar</li> </ul>	<p>System-wide efficiencies and efforts to ease student transitions from college to college, primarily from CCV to the four-year colleges, are always advisable. The foremost among these is to decentralize/reduce (or even eliminate) the Office of the Chancellor, the functions of which could be moved to the Council of Presidents and to individual campuses, eliminating much of the \$8 million dollars currently funneled away from the education of students every year. The remaining “proposals” are too vague or unfinished to address. The fundamental strategy of all the colleges and of the central office has always been to cut the instructional budget first and foremost. But that is essentially amputating the torso for the sake of the limbs. The mindset must change!</p>
<p><b>Budget cuts.</b> Elaine and Nolan gave the NVU Strong Committee time and support in the development of a positive, forward-looking vision for NVU. They did not force us to recommend outright cuts. The Committee’s recommendations included program consolidation and</p>	<p>Unfortunately, the primary objective to “pivot in the direction of a work college,” at least as articulated here, further reduces the appeal of the colleges and, hence, fails to build enrollments to a sustainable level. Instead, it simply confines the college within a narrow “niche” in the</p>

<p>accelerated unification steps that we hope will save money, and those would likely result in fewer opportunities for part time professors. Elaine and Nolan have made it clear that additional, painful cuts will need to be proposed. Those cuts won't need to come to fruition if the university and the community rally behind this model, and compel the legislature to provide the multi-year support that will be required to build it. Since the Committee did not recommend specific budget cuts, that task will now fall to the Executive Team. This is an important and necessary task; in a worst case scenario wherein the legislature gives NVU no more than one year of bridge funding, and we are not successful in finding grant funding, the NVU administration would be remiss to be caught flatfooted. However, the Committee's report to the President is that our primary wish is to envision a bright future for NVU, and work diligently toward it in the ensuing months and years.</p>	<p>hopes of making it somehow unique (despite the fact that there is an existing Work College situated right between Lyndon and Johnson). Lower enrollments will necessitate cuts and ultimately the elimination of the institutions as the Chancellor and BOT originally planned, no matter how the existing buildings are reallocated for use. Keeping the buildings open and occupied, just to keep the doors open, is not at all the same as "provid[ing] affordable, high quality, student-centered, and accessible education, fully integrating professional, liberal, and career study, consistent with student aspirations and regional and state needs." We have been moving in the direction of "niche marketing," as Carol Moore put it, since 1999, which has simply lost us students, and not because of declining demographics. Instead unaffordable tuition and narrow marketing have made the colleges unsustainable in the face of declining funding from the state of Vermont. The answer is simply not more of the same cuts and reduction of scope and purpose.</p>