

VSCS Thrive Vision Statement for the Future of the Vermont State Colleges

We have heard the call for a “twenty-first-century” educational system, to use the Vermont legislature’s terms, that ensures a “high-quality, affordable, sustainable future, a future that is workforce-connected and robust in its online capacities.” But we have already spent the first fifth of this twenty-first century aiming almost exclusively in that direction. When Bob Clarke was appointed chancellor more than 20 years ago, having served as president of VTC where, for example, he developed the CREATE program to serve IBM, he brought that focus directly to the forefront of the VSC as a whole, while making considerable changes to consolidate and centralize all the colleges as a single-focused institution. Tim Donovan, who had served as president of CCV, followed Bob Clarke and brought that distinct focus to the system as a whole. Jeb Spaulding, whose experience in education was largely as director of career and workforce development at the Vermont Department of Education, brought a continued emphasis on the centrality of CCV and a concerted effort at consolidation and unification, at the expense of the range and individuality of the colleges, not to mention their sustainability.

There is no denying that CCV (like VTC) plays a decidedly valuable role and serves a crucial audience in Vermont’s higher-education landscape. However, such a role is definitely not the totality of what the VSCS as a whole should and must do to serve the needs of higher education in Vermont. Frankly, continuously pursuing the trajectory of workforce development at the expense of a broader and more robust range of educational opportunities and experiences—all while state funding has continued to decline, forcing a rise in tuition—is far more responsible than demographic declines for the situation in which we now find ourselves. To do more of the same will surely continue the decline in enrollments as Vermont and out-of-state students look for educational opportunities elsewhere, which will eventually necessitate closing colleges and devastating Vermont communities both economically and culturally.

Moreover, the objection to an exclusive focus on workforce development for all of the VSC colleges is not merely that it has proven ineffective as a strategy and served to narrow education and to strip away more viable, productive educational models for the VSC as a whole, but also that it perpetuates and reinforces significant and destructive inequities of opportunity and access based on class, race, gender, and even geography, inequities that have been massively exacerbated by the neo-liberal economic, social, and taxation policies of the last 40 years and more.

Christopher Newfield has written, in *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (John Hopkins University Press):

For years now, our public colleges have been cut, squeezed, trimmed, neglected, overstuffed, misdirected, kludged, and patched. As a logical result, they do their core educational jobs less well than they used to—in a period when society needs them more than ever. We can’t patch the public systems any more. We need to reconstruct them. (Newfield, 2016, p. 305).

For several decades, business, educational, and political leaders in our state have decided that mass educational quality is out of reach for Vermonters. We seek to overturn this quite anti-public phase in our collective history—resulting in the crowning of the VSCS as the most anti-public public university system in the country—and to reconstruct our Vermont public universities.

American public universities have been noted as failing the current and future generations—requiring students and their families to take on more debt for an education that is now considered necessary while spending too little on the core activities of teaching and research (Newfield, 2016). This devolutionary funding model is even more evident in Vermont. Vermont public higher

education funding has ranked dead last in the country, in-state tuition is amongst the highest in the nation, and instructional spending is far too low—VSCS four-year universities have ranked far below the average public institution, below the average private institution, and far too close to the average for-profit institution in instructional expenditures for every tuition dollar garnered, with NVU ranking last in the VSCS (Hall, 2019). We have effectively defunded higher education in the state of Vermont to its current condition—strikingly anti-public and continuously sliding towards privatization and corporatization. We cannot move forward as a public university system from here. Too strong an emphasis on workforce development and on-line education will not change our anti-public status—it will cement such.

We challenge the notion that we can continue to compensate state disinvestment through shifting the funding burden from public to private sources, such as increasing tuition and student fees, while expanding private corporate influence into our public colleges. According to Newfield (2016), such a reliance on private revenues subordinates the university system to corporate-sector principles and practices while the ethos of corporatization hides the non-market values of the university as a public good—effectively degrading the mission of the university. As Newfield asserts, the most obvious impact of corporatization is students paying more to receive less. The rejection of this ethos by the general public is illustrated in Professor Greg Petrics’ 2020 analysis of the negative relationship between VSCS student enrollment and tuition increases. The general public also rejected this ethos during the September 2019 Board of Trustees meeting—students demanding enhanced educational opportunities and an end to outsourced on-line education (See Appendix A).

Considering the emphasis of the NVU Strong! Committee and VSCS legislative committee on expanding on-line education, we assert that any attempt to place students who seek a campus-based education into on-line courses, due to outright policy or as a default due to a lack of campus-based course offerings, is unjust, exacerbates educational inequalities, and must be rejected. On-line courses have been utilized in an attempt to reduce instructional costs while maintaining educational quality but have failed (Newfield, 2016). Jaggar and Xu (2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016) found that students who took on-line courses early in their educational career were significantly less likely to return to school in following terms. Furthermore, students who enrolled in a higher proportion of on-line courses were significantly less likely to graduate, earn a certificate, or transfer to a four-year institution. Most strikingly, while Jaggar and Xu found that all students in the study experienced decreases in their performance in on-line courses, some struggled more than others: males, younger students, Black students, and students with lower grade-point averages. A similar study of student performance found that students’ likelihood of completion or passing with a C or better were lower for on-line courses than those provided in face-to-face classroom settings (Hart, Friedman, and Hill, 2015). Columbia University researchers used a dataset containing approximately 500,000 courses taken by community and technical college students in the state of Washington and found that “performance gaps between key demographic groups already observed in face-to-face classrooms (e.g., gaps between male and female students, gaps between White and ethnic minority students) are exacerbated in on-line courses. This is troubling from an equity perspective” (Newfield, 2016, p. 248). This speaks clearly to the concern we have regarding the NVU Strong! Committee’s recommendations for students to complete their general education requirements and lower level major requirements via NVU Online or CCV (largely on-line).

We also reject the use and expansion of NVU campus-based resources to create the wholly distance-only institution, NVU Online, complete with its own marketing and administrative and tuition structure. On-line institutions have been found to have one-third the number of full-time faculty compared to community colleges and one-eighth of the proportion provided by public

research universities (Newfield, 2016). Student-faculty ratios were also found to be worst at entirely on-line schools, which also had the worst graduation rates—worse even than for-profits overall (Newfield, 2016). We assert that any need for emerging technologies can be provided by the campus-based faculty and should not be delivered through an all administrative-run enterprise, which cannot adequately assess the academic quality of the content or delivery as faculty specialists in the disciplines can.

Moreover, shifting to a reliance on on-line education, largely for revenue enhancement alone, is a bit of unfounded magical thinking. On-line offerings may, in certain circumstances, very well serve as useful additions to campus-based offerings, but, besides the pedagogical problems now comprehensively demonstrated by the forced experiment of shifting to remote learning and the starkly negative student reaction everywhere, there is already considerable market saturation and well-established options that NVU and the VSC in general would find stiff competition—not to mention the very real infrastructure costs and advertising costs that deplete funds more effectively spent marketing the value the colleges already offer and recruiting students who have been lost to high tuition and reduced academic programming and course offerings.

In sum, dependence on on-line courses has not been found to reduce costs due to their poor retention, completion, and graduation rates (Newfield, 2016).

We envision reconstructing the VSCS as a public university system. We draw upon Fabricant and Brier's 2016 proposals for change in public higher education and apply their work to our vision for Vermont's higher education system:

1. We believe that, while investment in public higher education in Vermont should grow dramatically, unequal public investment by race, class, gender, sexuality, or even geography is not acceptable; in fact, state investment must be greater in institutions educating the most academically and economically disadvantaged. We assert that any attempt to limit the educational opportunities of students in the northern third of the state is an attempt to constrain the education of those who are most geographically and economically disadvantaged. This cannot be tolerated.
2. Student and family debt financing for public higher education is a form of regressive taxation and benefits the financial industry alone at the expense of those who can least afford it.
3. We celebrate new forms of technology for teaching, but such must be utilized to meet both the needs and demands of Vermont citizens. Distance education, such as on-line or telepresence courses, must be decoupled from exploitive intentions to shrink labor costs, outsource unionized labor, or generate profits. We reject any proposal that explicitly places campus-based students into on-line courses as a default to complete their requirements.

We extend these proposals to include the following:

4. We envision comprehensive education provided to NVU and VSC students with a renewed emphasis on and commitment to teaching in intensive, personalized smaller groups—a step away from cost-cutting attempts to carry out instruction by an even larger proportion of part-time instructors, chiefly on-line, and a step towards ensuring VSC students have access to high-quality mentoring and instruction that promotes retention, early or on-time graduation, and higher paying careers post-graduation.
5. Recognizing that the future of our state, our nation, and our world depends on a citizenry that is engaged, informed, and critically thinking, we champion the national and

international efforts to expand MESH (Media literacy, Ethics, Sociology, and History) and SHAPE (the UK's re-investment in Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts for People and the Economy). We seek to amplify the research that suggests that graduates of social science and humanities degree programs are more resilient during economic downturns, possess creative and analytical capacity that promotes career flexibility, and are found to earn at least as much as their peers in STEM fields ten years post-graduation (The British Academy, 2020). We emphasize that program consolidation and elimination limit the ability of our schools to attract and retain students—both in-state and out-of-state.

NVU should expand its ability to offer intensive, personalized teaching, rather than emphasize maximum on-line course offerings and degree programs. COVID-19 has indeed disrupted higher education—in many senses, the forced transition to remote education has highlighted how committed students are to their in-person instructional experiences. Moreover, education during a pandemic has revealed what many teachers and students already believed—that on-line education exacerbates inequalities and is more difficult for students who are academically and economically disadvantaged. This collective understanding is now mainstream, with pieces in the *New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and the *Wall Street Journal* (See Appendix B), and class action lawsuits against universities for not providing the quality academic instruction the students had paid for—the underlying assertion being that their remote education was not comparable to face-to-face learning.

Providing students with direct, meaningful, personal access to faculty who see teaching and mentoring as their first priority has been a vital element of the Lyndon and Johnson campuses, with little to no emphasis on such as an asset by our former Chancellor or NVU administration. While students in other public systems largely have classroom experiences of lecture halls with 200+ students and may have only a single course in their undergraduate career with under 15 students, NVU has already been providing intensive and personalized instruction, traditionally holding enrollment caps at 25 students per class—a vital part of the colleges' marketing and recruiting strategies for students and families looking for the kind of personal attention on which many students thrive, particularly first-generation college students. Rather than try to focus on efficiencies via on-line and telepresence courses, we need to maintain and amplify this ability of our small state schools—particularly significant as the small private liberal arts colleges close. One of the most important investments a college can make for student outcomes and achievement is increasing the amount spent on instruction—providing robust course offerings and opportunities (Hall, 2019). By increasing instructional spending, student retention increases, and students are more likely to graduate on time or early. In addition, higher instructional expenditures are related to higher earnings for students post-graduation.

We recognize that the students of today and tomorrow are qualitatively different than 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 vital 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 and business leaders assert that the future will rely on us capturing the value of SHAPE disciplines themselves, as well as how such complements and works with STEM fields to create a healthy and functioning future. These extraordinary times 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.

What will NVU, the VSCS, and the Legislature commit to for educating our future students? An education that reinforces existing economic and educational disparities while catering to local businesses and big ed-tech lobbyists—increasing inequalities for our rural and economically disadvantaged students? Or a deep, rich education that fosters democratic participation, civic responsibility, and is responsive to the needs of its citizens?

The responsibility of the VSCS is not solely to produce or train *workers* for the economic development of our communities, but is rather to provide access to and support for the opportunity for our *citizens* to undertake a fully developed, expansive, and transformative education to advance themselves and to serve the economic, social, and cultural development of our communities, our region, and the world. We can do better than we have done for the past twenty years of narrowing and limiting, especially now in this national and global climate—manifested in massive protests and demonstrations driven largely by young people—that so clearly needs a larger and fuller vision of who we are as a local community, as well as a national and international one. Clearly, such opportunity and education are not only what our students want, but what they need and deserve.

What we need for our “re-visioning” of the VSCS is a true re-imagining of what we can and should do to serve the educational needs of Vermont—a re-imagining that is expansive, comprehensive, that includes the needs of any and all Vermonters—from those who need re-training for employment, to those who want to create new, vital, undreamed of careers and businesses in Vermont, to those who now leave the state in search of the kind of education that will open a world of opportunities and abilities that they don’t even know exist. Truly, we cannot do less and successfully meet our mission.

To reach this goal, of course, will require enormous changes, the most important of which is a fundamental re-visioning of how we understand and present to our constituents the nature, purpose, and design of education across the VSCS. The articulation of that new vision and future will then have to be taken by both leadership and stakeholders to the legislature and to the broader community to reverse the last forty and more years of underfunding the VSCS, so that the legislature fulfills its statutory responsibility to fund the VSCS “in whole or in substantial part.” We must conceive of and represent the broad range of what the VSCS can and should do as a vital investment—one that has an extraordinary return—in our communities and our state.

The future of the Vermont State Colleges, individually and as a system, is ultimately dependent on one thing above all others: a demonstrated commitment from the State of Vermont to fulfill their statutory responsibility to fund higher education in Vermont “in whole or in substantial part.” If there is one thing that can be said for Jeb Spaulding’s proposal to close three campuses to “save” the VSC, it is that it reduced the question to its simplest, barest outlines: at current funding levels, you can either have the colleges or not. Clearly, the public outcry against closure demonstrated that the people of Vermont, particularly the communities that rely on and host the colleges threatened with closure, want those colleges to remain at the economic, social, and cultural heart of their communities to serve all of Vermont and beyond. But Spaulding’s proposal also did enormous damage by placing in stark relief the underlying fragility of the colleges’ viability to ensure prospective students that they would exist to serve those very students and their communities.

No changes that the VSCS outlines for the future—changes that will take years to yield results, as the consolidation of Lyndon and Johnson into NVU has clearly demonstrated—will change that perception for prospective students and their families. We cannot expect them to invest their money and their futures in the colleges or the system if they cannot see clearly that the State of Vermont is willing to make the same commitment to the future of higher education in Vermont specifically in the form of funding the VSCS “in whole or substantial part.” With that funding commitment, however, the VSCS can not only reduce tuition to make the cost of an education for Vermonters and others much more affordable and appealing, but also reinvest in, reinvigorate, restore, and re-imagine the kind of fully developed, expansive, and transformative education to serve the economic, social, and cultural development of our communities, our region, and the world—in sum, the kind of wide-ranging, comprehensive educational opportunities, from CCV, VTC, and the campus colleges, that twenty-first century students are calling for and that the twenty-first century actually needs.

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Appendix A: Media Concerning NVU Online replacing campus

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Appendix B: Media Concerning Online Learning

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