

To the Select Committee on the future of (Public) Higher Education in Vermont and to NCHEMS:

I wish to share some thoughts and observations on a few sections of the second draft of NCHEMS' report – specifically the Recommendations section.

The Need for Urgency:

As the report notes, we can no longer kick this can down the road. The dire fiscal straits of the VSCS have been decades in the making, a reflection of long-term, sustained underfunding of public higher education in Vermont, where we have seen legislative support decrease from 49% to 17% of the Vermont State Colleges' operating budget over the last four decades.

This report notes that significant and sustainable increases in public funding will be necessary if the VSCS is to survive in any meaningful way and flourish –for the benefit of the people of Vermont. The report, which has devoted considerable attention to a substantial reorganization of the System, also notes that those potential changes notwithstanding “. . .cost reductions alone will not likely to be enough to address the long-term fiscal challenges facing the VSC.” A number of thoughtful suggestions to the Select Committee have been made regarding diverse funding strategies. They ought to be systematically explored.

Clearly it is time for Vermonters to decide if we want a viable, affordable public higher education system or not. If we do, we will have to pay for it. The alternative is the ongoing dysfunction of “an unsustainable status quo,” as the report so accurately put it. As someone who has taught in this system for 27 years and counting, I can attest to the relentless and mounting pressures to do more with less, and we have at long last reached a breaking point where we will have no choice but to do less.

Structure and Mission:

As a general observation, it seems the importance of graduate programs is largely ignored in this draft, something that ought to be corrected. These programs, the lion's share of which reside at NVU, contribute significantly to the fields of education and mental health in the state. They also present potential growth areas as we look to attract students beyond the traditional 18-24 year-old-demographic.

Also missing in this report seems to be any consideration of programs in fine and performing arts, including studio arts, music, theater, and creative writing. Certainly, there's a place for these programs in public higher education.

I would also like to question a finding beneath Figure 1 on page 6, which states, “Small course sections are also a consequence of declining enrollment unmatched by commensurate reductions in the faculty.” On the contrary, full-time faculty positions at NVU have been reduced by

roughly 30 % over the past five years (pre and post unification) due to resignations and retirements. System-wide, the ranks of full-time faculty have also seen substantial reductions.

Restructuring VSC Institutions and Aligning Their Missions to State Needs:

First, this second draft represents a welcome revision with appropriate representation of the liberal arts in its recommendations, a revision both needed and appreciated.

Three restructuring options have been presented and thoughtfully considered. Regarding the creation of a Vermont State University, I favor including Vermont Technical College under that unified accreditations, for I believe its continued survival would be better assured as part of this new university rather than as a spin-off. CCV residing in its own orbit is logical for myriad reasons, all of them ably considered in the NCHEMS document. Equally compelling logic extends to the remaining institutions consolidating under a single accreditation and academic administration.

Under possible problems with this model, the report mentions “the danger that the hard work that is going on to integrate Lyndon and Johnson could be stalled or confused with yet another consolidation.” I do not think this would be a problem. NVU is two years into what would reasonably be a five-year process – enough to have learned some valuable lessons about unification but short enough not to be fixed in stone. A Vermont State University with campuses at Johnson, Lyndon, Castleton and Randolph (hardly a revolutionary model nationally) would in many ways be a logical evolution stemming from the creation of NVU. As for the difficulties involved in assimilating unique campus cultures, I suggest that in the case of NVU, the emergence of a distinct culture remains gestational and therefore less of an obstacle. Beyond that, it should be easy enough with the one university/four campus model to maintain distinct identities, especially as individual Centers for Excellence emerge.

The third option, to maintain the organizational status quo, is no option at all. Bold transformation along with sustainable funding from the state will save us. Anything less will not.

The Chancellor’s Office:

If I am reading this section correctly, NCHEMS is suggesting a significant increase in the role of the Chancellor’s Office and of the VSCS Board of Trustees in exercising extensive system oversight. Regarding the trustees, a volunteer board with a quasi-rotating membership, would this not be adding further to the burdens and responsibilities it may not be prepared to assume? At what point would a more proactive board impede the agency of a future president of Vermont State University or CCV? If all substantial decisions are made at the level of the board and central office, why bother with presidents and provosts at all?

At a time when reducing the footprint of the chancellor's office has been widely discussed (and in some quarters fervently desired), it is surprising to see its expansion being recommended. Operating at considerable cost now, how much would that budget increase? How many more employees would be brought into what is regarded by many now as a bureaucratically bloated organization?

If we are to consider other organizational structures, and assuming the following would be possible in terms of existing corporate fiscal obligations, why not also consider the dissolution of the Vermont State Colleges System as we have known it, along with the VSCS Board of Trustees? Would not consolidation of the current system into two institutions present an opportunity for a commensurately pared down structure at the top? In its place would be Vermont State University and CCV – presumably each with its own board. It would, in fact, no longer be “a system” – Jim Page's apt observation notwithstanding. As public institutions, however, both would naturally still be accountable, ultimately to the Legislature.

With this suggestion, I mean no disrespect to the chancellor's office or to the board. Over many years, I have had the privilege and pleasure of working with a number of these dedicated public servants. Nor do I mean any disrespect to NCHEMS, which has provided a comprehensive, thoughtful draft. I do wonder, however, about the possibility of unintentional cognitive bias regarding this section of the document. NCHEM's focus is, after all, on education management. As the saying goes, and with apologies to Maslow, “When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail.”

Sincerely and respectfully,

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