

Vermont Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education
Monday, March 1, 2021 - 2:30pm
Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Present:

Members: Sen. Baruth, Heather Bouchey, Sarah Buxton, Megan Cluver, Daniel Daley, Suresh Garimella, Scott Giles, Steve Gordon, Rep. James, Joyce Judy, Sandy Mayotte, Devin Tingle, Jeff Weld, Sophie Zdatny, Briar Alpert,

Others: Sally Johnstone, Dennis Jones, Wendy Koenig, Joyce Manchester, Brian Prescott, Michael Thomas, Candace Williams

Minutes:

I. Discussion of reactions to 2/12/21 report from stakeholders/public

Megan: The Board has moved forward with a unanimous vote accepting the Select Committee's recommendation to merge. Listening sessions, especially with students, were impactful. The Board will working on accountability, metrics, and innovation.

Sen. Baruth: How was the question of adopting the SC's recommendation framed?

Megan: Brian and Dennis overviewed the report and Chancellor Zdatny outlined the resolution.

Joyce reads the resolution.

Sandy: Can you share more about where the Board thought more could be done innovation?

Megan: Partnerships with high schools.

Dan: I haven't heard too much from faculty but some concern around how the Select Committee and the labor task force's recommendation (which were endorsed by faculty unions across the system) align. At Lyndon and Johnson, there's fatigue after working on their merger for so long.

Devin: I've heard a lot of confidence, particularly after viewing Chancellor Zdatny's powerpoint showing the vision.

Dan: Will the system be hiring a consultant to start thinking through implementation?

Sophie: An RFP was put out in January and rpk Group was retained on program array and alignment. Separately, a firm or individual will be brought on for project management. Has asked the legislature for money for transformation efforts.

Rep. James: Colleagues were hoping for more detail around workforce development and link between state colleges and workforce pipeline.

Sophie: The system's implementation plan does include workforce development, including a workforce division to ease employer navigation and make activities and partnerships more transparent.

Rep. James: Should this area be included in our report or left to the system?

Joyce: We've discussed this a little in the steering group. We may direct people with questions to the system and Board's work. Our report may provide direction and guardrails.

Dan: We have four schools and the head of each has been tasked with better connecting on workforce development goals and activities.

II. Identify focus areas for NCHEMS and the Select Committee to cover in coming weeks

Joyce: Ideally, this report will have unanimous support from the committee.

Brian: Language will be revised to reflect the final presentation. The outline will be completed and data exhibits added to the appendices. We should signal the handoff from the Select Committee to the Board.

On implementation steps, we've identified all key parties, their key activities and a timeline.

We've been asked how to ensure that the legislature keeps its focus on higher education? There may be some metrics to help them understand the process and outcomes as the transformation moves forward. Additional metrics on carrying costs, campus identity/branding, workforce development, etc.

We need to recognize the uncertainty of the times we remain in.

We want to help show progress, while giving space to allow the Board to implement unification and transformation.

Sen. Baruth: We've talked a lot about the affordability metric. A foundational issue is that Vermonters cannot afford a degree. Is there a way to quantify progress on making credentials more affordable?

Brian: This is an important element because it provides a common way to do that calculations. At what point do you want to look for a reduction in unmet need?

Sen. Baruth: UVM announced another year of tuition freezes, which is a selling point. For the average Vermonter, this may all be noise except for the net price implications. If we could drop tuition and signal additional work ongoing, that would be great. But the fiscal issues are difficult.

Sophie: We announced a freeze for FY22 back in December.

Sen. Baruth: Some institutions freeze tuition for the students' time to degree. Metrics around affordability are important and we can't continue to be the most expensive place for higher education.

Sophie: We're considering how we can reduce prices particularly for credentials that are important to Vermont.

Joyce: Rep. James spoke to her colleagues so clearly about the importance of articulating priorities for higher education, including affordability. The legislature could wrestle with this.

Rep. James: Three cheers for what Sen. Baruth said. Affordability must be front and center. In the implementation timeline, the affordability standard is suggest as a key task for the legislature.

Jeff: It would help for this group to research and understand what affordability actually is. It's subjective and based on value.

Scott: We had a partial conversation about the high school graduation requirement of completing the FAFSA. This is a significant policy question, one that VSAC has been interested in. It merits more conversation. What coalition could we bring together in support of this? What resources are available to support retention efforts. The report provides a lot of data and it's valuable to support VCS's efforts to increase retention. VSAC sees biggest gaps in the high school continuation rate with community college. New England has a predilection toward 4-year degrees and we have an attainment shortfall for 2-year credentials.

Brian, Joyce and Sophie respond.

Heather: In agreement with Scott about the need for significant buy-in on the FAFSA recommendation. The general assembly should grapple with it. Pushback would be from communities where that would be a real change.

Joyce: In the end, it's the legislature or governor's office that have move our recommendations forward.

Would it be helpful to direct people to the Board's report or include it as an attachment? It's impressive to see what has to be done regarding implementation and may help address questions about what's next?

Sen. Baruth + Rep. James: Providing a link to the Board's report would be good for those who want to take a deep dive.

Sophie: A link enables people to have access to the latest reports and information.

Dan: Everyone should have the opportunity to review the labor task force's report.

III. Identify areas of concern to be addressed before Select Committee members endorse final report

IV. Next steps

Joyce: Steering group will meet with NCHEMS as they work on final draft. In early April, everyone will receive a copy to provide input. When it is sent to the legislature and governor's office, I will include a cover letter acknowledging your work and hopefully, unanimous endorsement. There are a lot of topics that we can flag for more attention. I see this as work for the house and senate education committees. For the state to design and develop a continuation of education, it must allocate its resources in the right places.

V. Public comments and questions

a. Members of the public, please share comments and questions at higheredcommittee@leg.state.vt.us

b. *Please be advised that with few exceptions, any submitted documents are open to the public*

See website for posted public comments.

Respectfully submitted,

Candace Williams
New England Board of Higher Education