

High-level Summary of Findings from November Focus Groups

Overview:

Throughout November 2020, NEBHE convened six focus groups, each 90 minutes long, of:

- State representatives
- State senators
- Faculty and staff union representatives
- Moderators of faculty assemblies
- Heads of the state's agencies on commerce and economic development and education, department of labor and governor's workforce board
- Representatives of VSCS Forward, NVU Strong, VTC's Transition Task Force and VSCS Thrive!

These groups were asked a common set of questions, as well as some specific to their roles within the state's postsecondary education or government ecosystem. Additional focus groups will be convened after the winter holidays.

Areas of agreement or shared understanding in response to common questions:

What are the two or three most important ways in which public postsecondary education should serve the state?

- It must be accessible to all Vermonters, in terms of:
 - Affordability and reasonable student debt burdens
 - Seamless transitions to and through postsecondary education, between institutions as necessary
 - Geographic proximity, a mix of online and in-person programming that value human connections
- Vermonters must receive high-quality postsecondary education that enables them to:
 - Land good jobs that offer family-sustaining wage (through strong workforce connections)
 - Be adaptable throughout their careers (due to liberal arts foundations)
- It must play a core role in strengthening Vermont's unique economy by:
 - Attracting students from out-of-state
 - Retaining graduates in-state
 - Supporting business development

What topics, issues and previous recommendations must the Select Committee address or include in its work?

- The need for a financial commitment from the legislature.
- Addressing the existing budget deficit and the ongoing financial sustainability of the system.
- Right-sizing and rethinking the administrative structure of the system and its campuses, including:
 - The role of Chancellor's office
 - Structural changes, including consolidations and changes in accreditation

- IT and data systems/capacity
- Physical assets
- Reversing the erosion of quality caused by inadequate funding, small departments
- A more inclusive governance model.
- Creativity in better serving students, including:
 - Greater array of credential offerings
 - Work-based learning opportunities
 - Improved, portable credit for prior learning policies
 - Competency-based education
- Stronger relationships and collaboration between all public institutions, reducing competition and increasing collaboration among institutions, and operating more like a system (as opposed to “a loose confederation of institutions”).
- Better integration across the state’s education and training silos.

What would be successful outcomes of the Committee’s work and report? What would have changed as a result of this effort?

- The state has a series of actionable solutions and an implementation roadmap.
- The Governor and Legislature would champion and provide resources to support the steps necessary to move forward.
- Student success would be at the center of the postsecondary system’s operation.
 - There is awareness of and confidence in postsecondary education opportunities and pathways.
 - Vermonters can access affordable, high-quality postsecondary education in whatever formats they prefer.
 - It can operate with a growth mindset, build on its strengths and better market institutions/programs to attract students and help retain graduates in Vermont.
 - The system is right-sized, has inclusive governance and eliminated competition between institutions.

Topics on which there is not broad agreement or common understanding:

- Clarity from the state’s political leadership about the strategic objectives the public’s postsecondary education investments should be seeking to achieve.
- The conditions that will allow the legislature to increase funding, or the likelihood it will occur.
- Right-sizing the employee structure within the system and its campuses, including faculty and staff.
- Faculty roles, such as their:
 - Investments in students’ personal development and success
 - Work to adapt curriculum and delivery of high-quality education
 - Willingness to collaborate with administration
- How best to use the physical assets within the system.
- The role/value of the Chancellor’s Office and Board of Trustees, and how to assure system-ness.

- The efficacy of online learning in meeting students' needs and interests, and bandwidth challenges in rural Vermont.
- The VSAC portable grant as an efficient use of state funds.
- A reasonable price for Vermonters to pay for postsecondary education.

Interesting ideas for the Select Committee's consideration or further investigation:

- A funding strategy that considers an amalgamation of opportunities from across the budget to support the vision for the future of higher education (funded internships, childcare grants, dual enrollment, etc.).
- Lessons learned from CT and ME's transitions to a single accreditation model.
- Identification of champions from across the stakeholder groups that can present a unified voice and encourage action from the Governor and legislature