

Vermont State Colleges System

Three legacy institutions unified as a new statewide university



STRUCTURAL CHANGE

One new institution, accreditation, leadership structure, and brand – with five primary campus locations retained.

WHY THE SYSTEM TRANSFORMED

Vermont's public colleges entered the COVID-19 pandemic facing long-term enrollment declines, a \$25 million structural operating deficit, and duplicative academic programs and administrative functions. The pandemic intensified these challenges to the point that closure was proposed for Northern Vermont University and Vermont Technical College, and their three campus locations, in 2020.¹

Following significant public opposition, the state legislature established the Select Committee on the Future of Public Higher Education in Vermont. The committee and the Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) concluded that a more integrated model was needed to preserve rural access, serve first-generation and low- to middle-income Vermonters, align academic programs with workforce needs, and create a financially sustainable system.

WHAT CHANGED

The Select Committee developed a three-part transformation strategy: (1) consolidate three institutions into one; (2) restructure administrative services and operations to eliminate the structural deficit; and (3) provide state transition funding to support the transformation while increasing the system's base appropriation by more than 50 percent.²

In 2021, the VSCS Board approved a plan to consolidate Castleton University, Northern Vermont University, and Vermont Technical College under a single leadership structure and accreditation while retaining the Community College of Vermont as a separate institution. The plan explicitly committed to maintaining a physical presence at the institutions' five primary locations while coordinating administrative services systemwide.³

Vermont State University (VTSU) launched on July 1, 2023, after receiving accreditation from the New England Commission of Higher Education.⁴ The new institution operates across campuses in Castleton, Johnson, Lyndon, Randolph, and Williston, along with additional learning sites supporting health and hospitality programs. The consolidation brought the legacy institutions under a single president's office, academic catalog, program portfolio, enrollment operation, student-support model, brand, and institutional accreditation. Cross-campus, hybrid, and online delivery were intended to give students access to a statewide array of programs while preserving local campuses.

RESULTS AND LESSONS

Although the legal and accreditation merger was completed, operational integration proved turbulent. VTSU's first year included leadership turnover, contested implementation decisions, a 6 percent decline in overall enrollment, and a 15 percent decline in first-year enrollment.⁵ Fall 2024 brought a meaningful rebound: new-student enrollment increased by 14 percent, and total enrollment grew by approximately 3 percent. By fall 2025, total headcount had increased by another 1.4 percent, and online enrollment continued to grow, although residential and commuter enrollment remained uneven across campuses.⁶ University leaders also reported a \$6 million budget shortfall and an ongoing need to consolidate programs and rightsize the institution's physical footprint.⁷ With state transition funding now ended, VTSU is continuing to respond to the decline in traditional college-age students by further refining its academic programs and campus footprint.

Vermont demonstrates both the potential and the difficulty of creating a new multicampus institution. A single brand, academic catalog, and accreditation can support a statewide program portfolio and more flexible delivery, but these changes do not immediately resolve differences in legacy cultures and systems or eliminate the costs of maintaining multiple campuses. Stable leadership, phased implementation, disciplined communication, realistic savings assumptions, and a long-term facilities strategy are therefore as important as the formal merger itself.

[1] Vermont State Colleges System Board of Trustees. (2020, June 1). Resolution 2020-004: Establishing a task force for system-wide transformation. <https://www.vsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2020-004-Establishing-Task-Force-for-System-Transformation.pdf>

[2] Lederman, D. (2022, August 23). From 3 struggling public colleges, a new university emerges. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/08/24/3-struggling-public-colleges-new-university-emerges>

[3] Vermont State Colleges System Board of Trustees. (2021, February 22). Resolution 2021-007: Transformation of the Vermont State College System. <https://www.vsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/2021-007-Transformation-of-the-Vermont-State-College-System.pdf>

[4] Vermont State University. (n.d.). Accreditation. Retrieved August 11, 2026, from <https://vermontstate.edu/about/governancecompliance/accreditation/>

[5] Knox, L. (2024, October 3). A messy merger's unlikely comeback. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/business/mergerscollaboration/2024/10/03/enrollment-recovery-consolidated-vermont-state>

[6] Vermont Business Magazine. (2025, November 12). Vermont State University fall enrollment shows strategic growth and expanded access. <https://vermontbiz.com/news/2025/november/12/vermont-state-university-fall-enrollment-shows-strategic-growth-and-expanded>

[7] Bergh, D. (2025, December 10). President Bergh's 2025 state of the university address [Speech transcript]. Vermont State University. <https://vermontstate.edu/news/president-berghs-2025-state-of-the-university-address/>