

July 15, 2022

Vancouver Community College Faculty Association
401-402 West Pender Street
Vancouver, BC

Mr. Don Wright,

Thanks for the opportunity to provide input on behalf of the roughly 600 Faculty who work at Vancouver Community College. I am currently the president of the Vancouver Community College Faculty Association, and before that I taught and was a department leader in a department in the college that teaches Adult Basic Education. I have worked at the college for twenty-two years. You provided five questions you are seeking responses to. I have used those questions as a jumping off point to discuss the points about Post-Secondary funding and Vancouver Community College funding that I think are most important.

1. What are the most important contributions the PSE system makes to the economic, social and environmental health of BC?

The ideal of the Post-Secondary “system” in BC when it was established over half a century ago was to make our province an affordable and integrated haven for all those seeking the individual transformations that education can provide. BC chose consciously to equitably treat all adults on that quest as adults. If these institutions that were created were to be open for those seeking critical thinking skills and an awareness of the richness of our inherited cultures, then they would also be open to those adults seeking skills that would be directly applicable to the economic needs of the day. They would be open to those adults needing to upgrade their literacy needs either because they are new to English language or because of circumstances that have put them at a disadvantage as they age-out of secondary options. All of these needs are authentic; the vision of the Post-Secondary system was based on the idea that meeting these needs leads to the betterment of individuals, and the betterment of our society.

- Colleges are mandated to deliver developmental education, and VCC delivers it to the most students. Roughly 25% of VCC programming is developmental. Developmental education is a crucial support to communities by offering affordable English language training and adult upgrading so that citizens can be readied for jobs, further training, or further education. **Developmental education is the bedrock of both Post-Secondary Education and communities.**

- According to Canada West Foundation's 2018 study, "Literacy Lost," Canada has a basic skills shortage that is getting worse. "According to International Literacy Assessments, more than 40% of Canada's workforce does not have adequate levels of literacy skills needed to learn efficiently and be highly productive in most jobs." The average scores of all age groups decreased between 2003 and 2011. This is compounded by the fact that all age groups tend to lose skills over time due to underuse, and this can cause a skill shortage. Workers with the lowest skills are also the ones least likely to be offered training by their employers. In addition, these lower skill jobs with workers whose skills are not regularly being updated are the same ones likely to be automated. The need to upgrade skills in low-skilled workers is vital. "The good news is that recent data...shows that increasing the literacy skills in the workforce by an average of 1% would, over time, lead to a 3% increase in GDP, or \$54 million per year, every year, and a 5% increase in productivity" (Literacy Lost, 2018, p. 02). **Clearly, investment in Post-Secondary programs that emphasize skills and increase literacy is crucial in British Columbia.**
- Currently, making a living in British Columbia is difficult, even for those making higher than average wages. For parents looking at Post-Secondary options for their children, or for students paying their own way and paying rent, colleges remain an affordable option. Colleges offer smaller classes and lower tuition, and thus they are a sensible and feasible choice for British Columbian families. **This difference between Universities and Colleges is a distinction that must be maintained in order to support the economic and social health of British Columbians.**

2. What could the system be doing differently to enhance its contributions to the economic, social and environmental health of BC?

It is a good time for the Post-Secondary system to take a sober view of itself. The first twenty years of the current system had affordable institutions with wide access points for students. For the last twenty years, tuition has increased rapidly, government funding has declined as a share of total institutional spending, and students have taken on higher and higher debt loads to fund their education. Many institutions have come to rely on the revenue from International students, despite being ill prepared to offer the kinds of supports those students require. **The "system" as it's been envisaged, barely exists. Where are its accountability mechanisms? How are its goals, beyond fiscal solvency, determined? How, as a "system", does it respond to any challenges?**

- We need not accept that government funding can't increase. There could be more money in the system by increasing taxes for the wealthy and corporations. According to Alex Hemingway from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, "inequality- reducing tax measures" could fund increased spending in the Post-Secondary sector:

A growing body of evidence tells us that long-term underinvestment in key public services and infrastructure is both economically and socially destructive. Increased spending on public services, social supports and physical and social infrastructure comes

with major economic benefits. Yet, BC Budget 2022 plans for a continued decline in provincial operation spending as a share of GDP, which is projected to be 19.2% in 2023/24 and fall to 18.7% by 2024/25. This is a significant drop from BC's spending levels two decades ago: eg: 21.5% GDP in 1999/00.

If the provincial government returned to spending levels similar to 1999/00, there would be about \$8.5 billion more available in the budget for 2023/24 (Policy Note, Alex Hemingway, June 23, 2022), money that could be put towards increased funding for institutions in the Post-Secondary system that need added support.

- The present government funding for PSE should go to the institutions and programs that need it. There should be a cap on surpluses, and the profits that exceed the cap limit should be funneled into the system for use by less wealthy institutions. The branches of the Post-Secondary tree should work to support the flowers, the other branches, and the trunk of the tree. Institutions who have fled the responsibility of providing developmental education should not be able to hoard the profits of doing so when developmental, health, and trades education, which are the most expensive areas, remain necessary for a functioning society. Workers at all levels of the economy need basic language and science and math education, but providing that is expensive. Profit-sharing between institutions that provide this essential but expensive service is only fair.
- **Institutions that fill a necessary niche, such as VCC and its developmental programming, should have increased funding.** It is appropriate that developmental programming should be tuition free, but when that funding is capped at an artificially low level, it creates too much pressure on other parts of the college to self-produce surpluses in order to balance overall. This model is not sustainable at all.

3. What do you think the key economic, demographic, social and technological trends that will impact Post-Secondary education in BC over the next 30 years?

- Urban Centers continue to be unaffordable, and this drives people to move further from cities and have longer commutes.
- Increased demand and opportunity for online and hybrid modes of delivery.
- Continued emphasis on Decolonization as well as issues regarding Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion
- Continued emphasis on mental health and well-being, and at the institutional level, expansion of needs for student support services.
- Ongoing and urgent need for immigrants and citizens to improve their basic skills, including language acquisition and cultural understanding, in order to fit into work and larger society in a more productive and meaningful way. (Until the mid-2010's, VCC had a robust and varied array of programming for newcomers to Canada. VCC could be a Centre for EAL research and Learning in, funded both provincially and federally, and reaching learners from newcomer to those ready

for Post-Secondary study).

- The cash-cow view of International students and the cash driven motivation of institutions continues and creates inequities and distortions of our actual reasons for doing this work: equitably and affordably delivering the education, skills and training that students and communities require in order to thrive.

4. How do you think the PSE system needs to evolve in response to these trends?

- Post-Secondary, and in particular colleges, must be there to support middle and lower income earners. With the rising cost of living, there is real danger that many ordinary families will be shut out of PSE all together.
- Institutions must be responsive to student need, and wrap around services must expand in order to serve diverse learners from diverse backgrounds.
- Post-Secondary, and colleges in particular, must address the skills shortage. Further commitment to and financial support of developmental programming must expand in order to do this.
- New funding sources such as “inequality reducing taxation” (Alex Hemingway), must be researched and implemented.
- Collaboration across ministries (for example the Ministry of Indigenous Relations, Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Social Development and Poverty Reduction) should be enabled and encouraged.

5. What modifications to the funding formula would you recommend?

- We need an equitable, not equal, approach to sharing resources. Institutions with massive surpluses do not need more funding.
- Somewhere along the way, public institutions became businesses expected to show profits. These are public institutions that must provide what the public needs in a way that is affordable and accessible. Public money should support institutions that continue to do that rather than seek higher and higher profits.
- **VCC delivers ABE and EAL – developmental programming – more than any other institution. We must be funded more to do this work. As more and more refugees arrive (lately many from Ukraine), and as society continues to need more skilled workers with high levels of literacy, the work we do at VCC is vital. Communities will suffer economically and socially if VCC limits its delivery of developmental programming because it can no longer afford to do so.**

In conclusion, If BC is to have a truly public system, then some sort of sharing of revenue needs to be introduced. Make VCC responsible for developmental work, but get a share out of other institutions for not doing that work. It should be noted, that VCC and Langara were once one comprehensive institution. It was a faculty strike in 1992 that led the Langara Faculty Association to propose the “divorce” from VCC. As a result, Langara took the university transfer programs (and vastly increased their International programming), and VCC was left delivering the developmental for both institutions without the natural mechanisms to charge high tuition.

Back in 1992, the LFA said they needed separation to settle their strike, and the NDP government of the time agreed. It did not then, nor has any government since, fundamentally address the issue of how to fund what remains of VCC. This is the fundamental cause of the structural deficit VCC faces.

VCC programming has always been of tremendous value even though it has not been valued. It addresses societal needs. The lack of appropriate funding for tuition-free developmental programming that needs to stay tuition free puts unreasonable pressure on VCC’s applied and other non-developmental programming. VCC is told to “get into the International game”, and it does, but it can only do so one cohort at a time, geared around what VCC already does, with small classes and intense practical educational formats. It cannot and shouldn’t recreate the UT programming that is such an attraction for international students at other lower mainland institutions.

It’s time VCC’s funding was reset. Make VCC a “provincial institution” with special place and special obligations. Kwantlen, Douglas, Capilano and Langara all offer university transfer based programming geared in large part to International students. VCC does something different, something its communities require. **Fund VCC to deliver developmental programming.**



Taryn Thomson, VCCFA President