



Vermont Council on Rural Development

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by **Tim Johnson**, [Burlington Free Press](#) ^[1]

MONTPELIER ? Vermont?s leaders love to tout synergy, and a joint news conference Thursday morning announced another showcase example: an initiative that will have colleges, state government and educable youth collaborating in a ?groundbreaking? partnership, all in support of the celebrated ?Vermont brand.?

The initiative is the Vermont Higher Education Food Systems Consortium, which will pool the resources of public and private colleges devoted to food-systems education, training and research. The plan is to create a virtual food-systems campus in hopes of making Vermont a ?premier destination? for postsecondary students at all levels who ?want to learn how to advance sustainable and robust food systems,? as a news release put it.

Present at the Statehouse were six higher education leaders to offer supportive remarks and sign the consortium agreement. State executives also attended and conveyed the enthusiastic endorsement of Gov. Peter Shumlin.

The colleges expect to exchange students and to share courses, internships, faculty and symposia. Financial arrangements ? for example, how to reconcile tuition payments for a student from one college taking courses at another ? remain to be worked out. The vision is to draw students from across the country to Vermont as ?the national epicenter of community-based food systems? as well as to enhance the vitality of the local foods movement here, according to Paul Costello, executive director of the Vermont Council on Rural Development and emcee for the event. That council founded the Vermont Higher Education Food Systems Council, which in turn advanced the consortium idea.

Participating institutions ? all of which offer agricultural education in various forms ? are Green Mountain College, Sterling College, University of Vermont, Vermont Law School and Vermont State Colleges, principally Vermont Technical College. Discussions are underway that could expand the group, Costello said.

?By attracting, inspiring and educating a new generation of entrepreneurs and leaders, we build a foundation for the future prosperity of Vermont communities,? Costello said, ?and we advance Vermont?s community-based food systems as a model of national and global significance.?

Jolinda LaClair, deputy secretary of the Agency of Agriculture, speaking on behalf of Secretary Chuck Ross, said the consortium was a top priority for Ross and the Shumlin administration.

?We talk about the renaissance of agriculture,? she said. ?It?s real. Today, farming and food systems are luring a new workforce to this sector. There is an opportunity ? a very real opportunity for Vermont to be a nationally recognized center for food system education.?

Tom Sullivan, UVM president, said the consortium was an example of the inter-institutional collaboration called for by a governor?s commission in 2012.

?This will achieve national recognition and reputation for the state of Vermont as a leader in food systems,? Sullivan said, adding that the consortium will enhance the institutions? ability to offer pathways for students who want to specialize in food systems.

What makes the consortium unique, said Phil Conroy, president of Vermont Technical College, is that each founding school approaches agricultural education from a different point of view. He cited the liberal arts approach of Sterling and Green Mountain colleges, the research focus at UVM, the public policy focus at Vermont Law, and Vermont Tech?s emphasis on production and applied agriculture.

?There isn?t a combination of institutions in the country that can claim the strength we have here in Vermont in agricultural education,? Conroy said.

This public-private higher-education collaboration is not unprecedented. In western Massachusetts, for example, four private colleges and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst have been sharing resources and cross-registering students since 1965.

?What?s happening here is important for a host of reasons,? said Matthew Allen Derr, president of Sterling College. ?It?s important mostly because we have billions of mouths to feed and a growing population and a climate that is challenged. And this is a group of colleges that have come together with a diverse set of educational objectives, a diverse set of missions, to say that the changes that are going on in our food system are important and Vermont has a role to play, that we have a voice that is critically important.?

Paul Fonteyne, president of Green Mountain College, said programs in sustainable food systems play a major role in drawing students from other states. Chancellor Tim Donovan said the consortium would give students an opportunity to draw from an array of institutions for a blended ?Vermont experience,? something beyond the traditional educational mold. Marc Mihaly,

president and dean of Vermont Law School, said interest in agriculture and food systems is burgeoning among his school's students and applicants.

Secretary of Administration Jeb Spaulding, representing the governor, said Shumlin asked him to tell the group: "I like silos when we need them, but not when we don't. This is one example where we're thankful they're getting rid of some silos between the higher education institutions and working together, and that is so Vermont."

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