

Vermont Tech Ag and Food System Transformation Project FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about the Project

These FAQs are meant to share information and answer questions about the project. Additional questions and responses will be added as new questions arise. The intent is to ensure a high degree of transparency throughout the process. Feel free to reach out to the Project's co-chairs at any time if you have questions [Regina Beidler, regina.beidler@organicvalley.coop; and Louise Calderwood, louisecalderwood1@gmail.com]

- *What makes VT Tech unique? What is its value proposition?*
- *What is the Educational Value (vs. cost) of VT Tech education?*
- *How is the Vermont Tech Ag and Food System Education unique?*
- *How and why did this project begin?*
- *What are the risks of inaction and the benefits of changing this program?*
- *How will the outcome of this project address the changing needs of the regional farm and food system?*
- *Are there really jobs in the farm and food sector?*
- *What are the stages of the project?*
- *Who has been involved?*
- *What will VT Tech do with this transformation proposal once delivered and shown to be financially feasible?*
- *If successful, how will this process enhance enrollment?*
- *What is being recommended that will be a change from the current program?*
- *Why do we need a "Center for Agriculture and Food Entrepreneurship"?*
- *How will Vermonters interested in the dairy industry continue to be served?*
- *What will happen to the farm?*
- *How will students be able to participate in summer and weekend programming opportunities when their families need their help at home or students need to earn money to pay for tuition?*
- *What is there to do in Randolph when we're not in class?*
- *How does this program specific transformation project intersect with the larger VT Tech TAT transformation initiative and with the Legislative Select Committee on the VSC system more broadly?*
- *How is this process different than those that have been tried before?*

What makes VT Tech unique? What is its value proposition?

Vermont Tech is renowned for its practical, applied education, not only in agriculture but in many other areas as well. Students who attend Vermont Tech have the opportunity to learn associated skills in engineering, diesel mechanics, business and other areas to strengthen the depth and breadth of their skills as they prepare to enter the workplace or farm or start a food-related business.

- Best ROI of any college or university in Vermont
- VTC is 85% Vermonters
- 99% placement rate
- 48% of VTC students are First Generation college graduates
- 100% hands-on programs
- 15:1 student - teacher ratio
- 4th lowest debt of all VT schools
- Of the 72 ag program students who graduated from VT Tech between 2016-2018, 90+ % are still working in Vermont as farmers or in agricultural support industries.
- Historically and currently, Vermont Tech proves to be a go-to institution for new and beginning farmers. From 2008-2018, VTC graduated 147 students that manage farms, 46% of which own their own farm.

What is the Educational Value (vs. cost) of VT Tech education?

Sadly, tuition at Vermont Tech is high compared to peers primarily due to the lack of public support of public higher education in Vermont. Vermont ranks 49th or 50th in the US for public support of higher education depending on when you look. Despite the high tuition, Vermont Tech is ranked #1 for return on investment of tuition dollars compared to ALL other colleges and universities in Vermont! This is based on a [Georgetown University Center for Education and Workforce Development](#) study completed in 2019. This means graduates from Vermont Tech earn their tuition dollars back in the form of salaries faster than graduates from all the other colleges and universities in Vermont! Our graduates launch careers in their field of study (we have 98-100% placement rate of graduates in jobs within 6 months of graduation every year) and earn salaries which enable them to pay off student loans, buy homes, and all they seek to enhance their quality of life faster than other Vermont higher education graduates.

How is the Vermont Tech Ag and Food System Education unique?

Vermont is fortunate to have several educational options for students interested in pursuing careers in agriculture and food systems. The Vermont Tech campus stands apart by offering both two and four year degrees with the opportunity to prepare for many careers in all facets of production agriculture and food-related enterprises. The campus farm offers opportunities to develop hands-on skills working with large animals, maple production and a variety of farm equipment at commercial scale. Vermont Tech encourages students to customize their college experience through internships in their chosen area of focus. Vermont Tech is the only Vermont college with courses in diesel mechanics and welding (skills often useful when heading towards a career in production agriculture). Additionally, Vermont Tech offers several courses in business, marketing and accounting which are essential for all types of farms and food-related enterprises.

How and why did this project begin?

In April, 2020, then Vermont State Colleges Chancellor, Jeb Spaulding, recommended that three Vermont State College campuses be closed including Vermont Tech's Randolph Center campus. Several people realized what the impact of a closure would mean for the future of applied agricultural education in Vermont and its food system and approached President Pat Moulton asking her permission to gather a stakeholder group to see what could be done. This project was convened in May, led by a Leadership Team of Louise Calderwood, Regina Beidler, Ellen Kahler, and President Moulton and involves more than 45 stakeholders on work teams, including a 13 member Steering Committee. Those involved have 4 main motivations:

- #1 ensure that VT Tech Randolph campus does not close down; a key aspect of this is for a revised ag & food system educational program being financially sustainable which means substantially increasing enrollment and ensuring the VTC Farm at least breaks even in its expenses and revenue
- #2 revision the ag & food system educational program to be rigorous and relevant to an evolving food system and the jobs that are emerging in it
- #3 revision the ag & food system educational program so that VT Tech becomes THE place for applied, hands-on ag and food system education in the Northeast, with a clearly defined niche that enables VT Tech to recruit a much broader, more diverse student body from both VT and the Northeast. [note: students from VT dairy families will still experience a strong dairy program]
- #4 revision the role and focus of the VTC Farm, its facilities and 250 acres to better align with the core of what is being taught in the re-visioned ag & food system educational program

What are the risks of inaction and the benefits of changing this program?

The current Agriculture program has seen a steady decline in enrollment to unsustainable levels (current 2020-2021 academic year has 26 of students; pre-COVID enrollment has also been in steady decline since 2017) -- due in part to a smaller number of Vermont farm families who are sending their kids to VT Tech (which mirrors the decline in the number of dairy farms in the state which has dropped from 1,015 in 2009 to 664 in 2019), and insufficient staff capacity at VT Tech to conduct personalized recruitment for the program. Without a significant reboot of the program (including significant increases in enrollment from in-state and out-of-state students), it is at risk of no longer being offered. At the same time, the regional food system is growing and employers across the state are struggling to find enough workers so that they can capitalize on growing market opportunities. Vermont Tech is needed more than ever to train the next generation of food system workers and owners, for a wide variety of [careers](#) across many types of production (e.g., commodity, value-added) and in the areas between the farm-gate and the marketplace (e.g., food safety, supply chain logistics).

How will the outcome of this project address the changing needs of the regional farm and food system?

[Vermont Agriculture and Food System Strategic Plan 2021-2030](#) (a.k.a. VT Farm to Plate), identifies a number of workforce development needs that intersect with educational and [workforce development](#) programs at VT Tech. New England regional food system development efforts are underway to strengthen regional food supply chains and meet more consumer demand for food from within the region (e.g., [New England Feeding New England](#)) over the next 15 years, thus there will be a growing need for food producers across all categories of products. This will coincide with changing demographics that will lead to unprecedented levels of farm and food business succession to the next generation over the next 10 years. The State Workforce Development Board and VT Department of Labor are both interested in ways that technical education can be delivered across a range of economic sectors to support workforce needs of employers. Thus, VT Tech's ability to offer a range of experiential degree programs (1 year tech, 2 year AA, and 4 year BS/BT) delivered across a range of learning modalities (on-line and classroom/residential, semester-long and short courses, hands-on VT Tech farm and internships, etc.) will position it well to attract students looking for a practical educational experience with near 100% job placement after graduation as well as continuing education credits to supplement their chosen careers.

Are there really jobs in the farm and food sector?

YES!

- 64,000 Vermonters employed; 6,554 net new jobs (11.2% increase) between 2009-2019.
 - Jobs range from production agriculture (e.g., dairy, livestock, grains, diversified vegetables), value added food manufacturing (e.g., cheese, yogurt, maple syrup, cured meats, beer, wine, ciders, and spirits, specialty products, artisanal bread), food related services (e.g., food hub operators, marketing/branding specialists, food safety experts, regulators, agronomists, nutrient management specialists, ag/food specific lawyers and lenders), food educators, food system developers (e.g., VAAFM personnel, non-profit organizations), distributors, warehouse personnel and food truck drivers, restaurant workers and chefs, and others. And careers in ag/food range from farm and production floor workers, to managers and owners.
- 11,500 farms and food businesses (2018)
 - Of 6,800 farms, 2,852 have sales >\$10k (42%)
- Economic output increased from \$7.5b in 2007 to \$11.3b in 2017 (48% increase)
 - Food manufacturing is 2nd largest manufacturing sub-sector in VT (\$3 billion in annual sales); it is the only one that grew during the last recession
- Vermonters' purchase of local food and beverages has increased from 5% (\$114 million) in 2010 to 13.9% (\$310 million) in 2017, annually. Even greater sales of Vermont products occur across New England and the Northeast.
- You can read about the needs of Vermont farm and food employers [here](#).

What are the stages of the project?

Large group visioning sessions, small group listening sessions, and an alumni and Randolph area survey fed into two initial work teams (Culture & Curriculum Team and Program Models Development Team) which explored the kind of curriculum and program format and delivery model would best serve the state's agriculture and food system needs. The teams also explored how the VTC Farm connects to needed learning objectives. Each team developed a set of recommendations that have been handed to a Business Case team for their consideration. The Business Case Team is currently exploring the financial viability of the proposal, developing multi-year financial projections, enrollment targets and a capital expenditures budget and is developing a business plan. A Communications & Outreach team is working with staff at Vermont Tech to better understand the market demand for the program, develop core messaging to attract new students to the program, and develop a plan to publicize the program. All these efforts will then be presented to the leadership, staff and faculty at Vermont Tech by the end of March 2021. A final community meeting will be held in late March or early April to present the group's final recommendation and report to President Moulton.

Who has been involved?

Over 45 stakeholders have been involved in the project including VTC's President, faculty and staff, alumni, local producers, lenders, funders, legislative representatives and faculty and staff from other Vermont educational institutions. All of these people have donated their time and expertise as volunteers in this process including the Leadership Team and Steering Committee, since July 2020.

Process Leadership Team – meets weekly

- President Pat Moulton
- Louise Calderwood (co-chair), Echo Hill Farm Maple Products
- Regina Beidler (co-chair), Organic Valley
- Ellen Kahler, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund / VT Farm to Plate

Steering Committee -- meets monthly

- President Pat Moulton
- Louise Calderwood (co-chair), Echo Hill Farm Maple Products
- Regina Beidler (co-chair), Organic Valley
- Ellen Kahler, Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund / VT Farm to Plate
- Marc Mihaly, retired, VT Law School (established the Center for Ag & Food Systems at VLS)
- Philip Ackerman Leist, Sterling College, Dean of the School of the New American Farmstead
- Jed Davis, Cabot Cooperative Creamery, Sustainability Director
- Dan Tobin, assistant professor -- UVM CDAE
- Kate Finely Woodruff, UVM - office of Dean of CALS
- Laura Ginsburg, VT Agency of Agriculture, Section Chief, Ag Development Division
- Meg Nelson - VTC alum, Nelson Farms and Shadagee Farm (dairy) [alum]
- Steve Schubart - VTC alum, Grass Cattle Co. (grass-fed beef) [alum]
- Molly Willard -- representing VTC faculty/staff

- OBSERVER: Erica Campbell – serving in a personal capacity (but she works for US Senator Sanders)

Work Teams

Program Models Development Team:

- Philip Ackerman Leist – Chair
- Dan Gingue, Dehm Associates
- Dan Tobin, UVM CDAE
- Grace Oedel, Executive Director, NOFA-VT
- Kate Duesterberg, Cedar Circle Farm
- Chuck Ross, former Secretary Agency of Ag, former director UVM Extension
- Sarah Danly, VT Farm to Plate (VSJF)
- Molly Willard, VT Tech

Culture & Curriculum Team:

- Marc Mihaly -- Chair
- Emily Wright, dairy nutritionist, alum
- Dr. Kim Crowe, VT Tech
- Emma Marvin, Butternut Mountain Farm
- Brent Beidler, former organic dairy farmer, VT Tech adjunct prof
- Katie Ballard, Miner Institute
- Sherry Lussier, retired, former CTE teacher
- Vern Grubinger, UVM Extension
- Steve Schubart, Grass Cattle Co, alum
- Laura Ginsburg, VAAFM

Dairy Sub-Committee of Culture & Curriculum Team:

- Laura Ginsburg – Chair
- Steph Nault, VT Tech
- Chelsea Sprague, Sprague Farms
- Henry Pearl, Hillview Farm, VT Tech alum, 2+2 program
- Ryan Andrus, Bridgman Goat Farm
- Linda Dimmick, Neighborly Farms
- Jamie St. Pierre, Pleasant Valley Farms
- Meg Nelson, Nelson Farms and Shadagee Farm, alum

Survey & Input Committee: [surveying alumni and greater Randolph community]

- Erica Campbell – Chair
- Diane Bothfeld, Dairy Section Chief, VAAFM
- Meredith Niles, UVM

- Amanda Chaulk, VT Tech
- Jenn Colby, UVM Extension

Business Case Team:

- Jed Davis – Chair
- Andy Wood, VEDA/VACC loan officer, alum
- Brett Denny, VT Dairy Herd Improvement Assoc.
- Holly Fowler, Northbound Ventures
- Marty Strange, retired, Randolph resident
- Dan Gingue, Dehm Associates
- Jenn Colby, UVM Extension
- Steph Nault, VT Tech
- Lit Tyler, VT Tech
- Greg Hughes, VT Tech

Communications & Outreach Team:

- Kate Findley Woodruff – Chair
- Megan Smith, former Commissioner, VT Department of Travel & Tourism
- Mary White, VT Farm Bureau
- Amanda Chaulk, VT Tech (Marketing & Communications)
- Jessica Van Deren, VT Tech (Admissions)

In addition, 3 larger community meetings have been held since late June with additional stakeholder involvement. Numerous listening sessions with current and former faculty and staff, various producers (e.g., dairy, goat, beef), and neighboring farms have taken place to solicit their input and feedback.

During January and February, 2021 a number of additional 1-time small group listening sessions were held with beef producers, goat industry members, value added food manufacturers, alumni and 2+2 graduates, dairy heifer grazing practitioners, and others.

What will VT Tech do with this transformation proposal once delivered and shown to be financially feasible?

With a financially feasible plan we will move forward to implement that plan! The first step will be to gain acceptance of the new program plan more broadly within the Vermont Tech community. This work has been ongoing throughout the process to some degree, but like with any “new” program at Vermont Tech, there must be a step taken to introduce the program and seek necessary approvals. While the agriculture program is not new, this “reboot” contains enough new and different elements that it may need formal approvals as well as informal support within the college and perhaps the VSCS Board of Trustees. There is keen interest within the Board and the Legislature for this program and presentations will be made to provide good working knowledge of what we are doing to gain official and unofficial

support. Once the initial plan development process has been completed, we will also reconstitute an Advisory Board for the program to work with the President, staff and faculty to help implement the plan.

The biggest challenge will be procuring the necessary funding to proceed with the farm renovations, equipment purchases and other capital needs of the new program. The other big financial need will be obtaining operating “seed” funding for up to three years of start-up. This will include funding needed positions for up to three years to enable enrollment to grow to cover those staffing expenses. We intend to pursue grants, philanthropy and other public and private funding. We know this will take time and significant support to accomplish. We will need a wide array of funders and others who can assist and support the pursuit of funding.

If successful, how will this process enhance enrollment?

Team recommendations have included a focus on a wider array of skill development across more types of agriculture and food system work and to a variety of different audiences. These audiences include traditional 2 and 4 year degree seekers but also second career or continuing ed learners who would appreciate stackable credentials, certificates and/or more intensive, short term, hands-on learning opportunities. Outreach will intentionally be focused on all of these audiences and will expand across the Northeast, as well as serving VT Tech’s traditional base of Vermont students. To be financially sustainable, the ag and food System program at VT Tech needs to substantially increase the number of full-time students and participants in continuing education and workforce development offerings each year.

What is being recommended that will be a change from the current program?

- The overall program design must appeal both to students from Vermont farm families, as well as an expanded audience (e.g., those interested in farming or food production who do not come from a farming background). The latter include students from elsewhere in the Northeast, students aspiring to start new food businesses or farms, career changers, active professionals, and others simply seeking applied knowledge of farming and the food system.
- Courses need to be combinable into a variety of educational products, ranging from the BS/BT degrees, to a traditional AA, to a one-year technical degree, to stackable credentials and certificates. Development of a robust summer session and January term will increase course offerings and support students in identifying unique educational opportunities that match their individual circumstances. Development of technical certificates and continuing education opportunities will increase the population from which to draw VT Tech students.
- Moving to a year-round school year will enable a much wider range of course offerings, both for traditional students as well as career changers, active professionals and continuing education students. Offering a range of short courses in the summer months will enable the traditional VTC student to take these courses with other adults, thus enhancing their exposure to other learners outside of their student cohort.
- The curriculum should strengthen its experiential emphasis through a guided and rigorous semester in practice and other internship opportunities. A 3rd semester internship will match

students with a closely monitored work experience in an environment that mirrors their career ambitions and serving as the foundation for their final semester and their Capstone project.

- A to-be-named Center will serve to combine all the elements of a robust ag and food system educational program under one umbrella for marketing, recruitment, advising, cross-school collaboration.

Why do we need a “Center for Agriculture and Food Entrepreneurship”?

A clearly defined Center for Agriculture and Food Entrepreneurship (CAFE) programs would offer a number of advantages:

- Easily identifiable and marketable portal for prospective students to see the variety of available learning options.
- Visibility of VT Tech’s thought leadership in this area and demonstrated institutional commitment to keystone programs representative of Vermont’s heritage and future.
- Centralized coordination for procurement, dispersal, and impact assessment of external funding both for innovative and operational needs that enhance educational opportunities for a range of audiences.
- A structure that allows for more collaborative and coordinated efforts between classroom, staff, full semester internships and the VTC farm and between other staff and faculty at Vermont Tech, including strategic budgeting across all related sectors.
- More natural way to build synergy and coordinated educational offerings for a variety of audiences.
- The ability to place advising at the center of the learning process to assist individual students in meeting their individual learning and professional goals.
- Ability to strategically market, implement, assess, and continually enhance a suite of programs and learning modalities under the umbrella of the Center.

How will Vermonters interested in the dairy industry continue to be served?

A Dairy Sub Committee representing a range of dairy operations (e.g., conventional small and large scale, goat, organic, and value-added products) met 6 times to explore ways to best serve Vermont’s

existing dairy community and position it for the inevitable transition to the next generation of dairy farmers. Part of this exploration also included how best to utilize the assets (e.g., 250 acres of land) and facilities (e.g., existing dairy barn and associated buildings) as a learning lab connected to core classroom learning. The goal of the process is to increase the diversity and quality of dairy related educational opportunities for students. The 2+2 program with UVM will also be continued, and hopefully expanded upon if sufficient funding is secured.

Vermont is well-known as a progressive dairy state with deep diversity of farms and processors, leading the regional dairy sector and producing value-added products that receive awards around the world. Vermont is also now hosting one of three USDA Dairy Business Innovation Centers (DBIC) which

supports work in developing the production, processing, and consumption of regionally produced milk. The DBIC has several objectives that may be of interest to VTC students, such as transition to grazing education, value-added product training, and additional development of the goat dairy sector.

What will happen to the farm?

Food and farming systems in Vermont and the Northeast are evolving and growing rapidly, offering expanded opportunities for businesses of all kinds. This changing environment requires entrepreneurs and employees to build enhanced skill sets to meet ever changing workplace needs. Vermont Technical College is well positioned to respond to these needs through a strong core curriculum and a variety of applied, hands on learning experiences.

A production dairy herd has been part of the fabric of Vermont Tech since the inception of the Agricultural School (c. 1910). Despite the great advantage and active symbolism of having these animals on-site for learning, it has become increasingly clear that the operational efficiencies necessary to make a dairy viable are not tenable in a campus setting, where pedagogy takes precedence over business management. At Vermont Tech, the primary business is education, not a dairy operation. The difficult decision has been made to divest of the milking herd while maintaining groups of other large ruminants, on the campus farm, including dairy heifers and a grass fed beef herd.

Vermont Tech continues to believe in the importance of educating future dairy farmers and dairy industry professionals. Dairy programs will remain part of the educational offerings at the college. Campus learning will be supported and supplemented through partnerships with local dairy farmers through closely supervised work and internship opportunities coupled with robust farm and ag production facility visits and interactions. We believe the combination of diverse applied experiences on campus along with exposure to the expertise of Vermont farmers will allow the delivery of the dairy curriculum without compromise and will afford Vermont Tech greater financial predictability and stability.

The farm as it is currently managed with 80 cows and selling to Agrimark loses about \$200,000 in revenue each year, while the orchard and sugaring operations are roughly break-even enterprises. The Business Case Team is currently exploring a number of scenarios (and running enterprise analyses) re: what would be a financially sustainable use of VT Tech land assets and farm facilities. Scenarios include: moving away from a conventional milking herd focus to a more diverse mix of animal and diversified agriculture; value-added products; having a smaller cow dairy herd and a robotic milking machine; offerings that engage students in farm management, marketing and on-farm enterprises (e.g., farm stand of VT Tech products, CSA, selling to Sodexo); and ways to engage with the larger Randolph community (e.g., marketing products). Combined with a strong internship program (e.g., on a large conventional dairy farm, at Cabot Creamery, at a local vegetable farm, at Ayers Brook Goat Dairy), these learning opportunities will accentuate the range of options available to an increasing diversity of students, who have a wider array of interests. The intent is to expose students to a wider array of

farming types (e.g., grass-fed livestock, traditional dairy, maple sugaring, diversified vegetables) and careers in the food system (e.g., meat processing, sales and marketing food, logistics, food safety, food entrepreneur, etc.) so that VT Tech can attract a wider range of students than it has in the past.

How will students be able to participate in summer and weekend programming opportunities when their families need their help at home or students need to earn money to pay for tuition?

There is awareness that these are very real needs. However, there are learning opportunities that are best presented during the summer growing season or in shorter class formats at less traditional times in the academic calendar. Vermont Tech and the project planning group are actively exploring funding alternatives to make sure that all students are able to afford the opportunity to participate in these important elements of their education.

What is there to do in Randolph when we're not in class?

Outdoor recreation is the centerpiece of Randolph's draw for many around the region with the 18-hole Montague Golf Course and more than 240 miles of mapped trails for hiking, biking, cross-country and back-country skiing, snowmobiling, and snowshoeing. The town features a bowling alley, small movie theatre and a mix of stores and restaurants for a variety of tastes. Motio Rec (<http://motiorec.com/>) offers indoor activity including batting cages, indoor golf and climbing walls. Chandler Music Hall (www.chandler-arts.org) offers a variety of performances year round including the renowned New World Festival every Labor Day weekend which features Celtic musicians from all over the world. The White River Valley Chamber of Commerce hosts a number of local events including the annual 4th of July Parade and the very popular Winterfest in mid February (<https://www.randolphwinterfest.com/>).

How does this program specific transformation project intersect with the larger VT Tech TAT transformation initiative and with the Legislative Select Committee on the VSC system more broadly?

The work of these groups complement each other not by design but in practice. The work of this process fits perfectly in the overall transformation planning of Vermont Tech and the work of the Transformation Advisory Taskforce (TAT) put in place to help guide the transformation of the entire college. One aspect of that work is program review of all academic programs. This process has essentially accomplished much of that work for our ag related programs. The TAT has prioritized reviewing our physical infrastructure to seek efficiencies and consolidation which is also part of this work. The TAT work has not addressed the farm assets because this planning is.

The Legislative Select Committee is focused on the entire Vermont State Colleges System (VSCS) focusing on governance and system configuration. That process assumes all the VSCS institutions are undergoing processes to enhance efficiency in operations and physical infrastructure as well as program reviews to avoid duplication appropriateness of programming. The TAT and Ag & Food Systems planning is doing just that for Vermont Tech.

How is this process different than those that have been tried before?

Past efforts have primarily been staff and faculty led, involving few external stakeholders and VT Tech has experienced 3 of presidents in the past 10 years which often stymied real program transformation from occurring. We believe this time will be different because: the ag/food program at VT Tech is at risk of being closed down due to low enrollment (thus there is an urgent imperative to transform the program); the entire VT State College system is under even greater financial strain which could lead to campus-wide closures; an external stakeholder group of dedicated volunteers is working side by side with the VT Tech President, Faculty and Staff (since they also have to run the college while planning is also taking place); these external stakeholders are committed to acting as ambassadors for the recommended transformation process once a final report has been issued and can be deployed to talk with Legislators, state officials, funders, and prospective students; and this process has the full support of President Moulton, who has been intimately engaged in the process from day 1!