

February 10, 2023

To Representative Pelowski
From Nathan Hopkins, Legislative Analyst
Subject History of vocational-technical education in Minnesota

This memo discusses the history of vocational-technical education in Minnesota from the early 20th century to the present.

Early Beginnings: 1917-1945

The earliest formalization of vocational education in Minnesota came in 1917. As World War 1 reduced the influx of skilled workers from Europe, Congress passed the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 (Pub. L. No. 64-347),¹ appropriating funds for the promotion of vocational education and vocational teacher training. That same year, the Minnesota legislature designated the High School Board (a predecessor to the Department of Education, which was established in 1919²) as the Minnesota Vocational Board, making it the state entity eligible to accept federal funds under the Smith-Hughes Act.³ School districts with vocational schools or departments were eligible to receive the funds to pay the salaries of teachers of “agricultural, industrial, or home economics subjects.”⁴ Teacher training schools could also receive the funds for preparing teachers of those same subjects.⁵

In the lead up to the United States entering World War II, the conflict in Europe created demand for workers in war-related industries.⁶ In 1940, Congress appropriated funds for “training skilled and semiskilled workers” in various fields,⁷ and Minnesota accepted the funds through a legislatively authorized executive order,⁸ establishing a “War Production Training” program under the Department of Education. The War Production Training program offered pre-employment and post-employment supplementary programming for adult students at 46 statewide centers.⁹ When the program was disbanded in 1945, its equipment was ordered transferred to school districts for disposition.¹⁰

¹ 50 YEARS, MINNESOTA TECHNICAL COLLEGE SYSTEM (1995), at 4.

² See [1919 Laws, Ch. 334](#).

³ See [1917 Laws, Ch. 491](#).

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ MINN. TECH. COLLEGE SYSTEM, *supra* note 1, at 4.

⁷ Pub. L. No. 76-668.

⁸ See [Laws 1939, ch. 206](#).

⁹ MINN. TECH. COLLEGE SYSTEM, *supra* note 1, at 5.

¹⁰ A HISTORY OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION IN MINNESOTA, MINNESOTA STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (1967), at 26, available [online](#).

After the war, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (a.k.a. the "G.I. Bill")¹¹ increased the demand for postsecondary education, the federal George-Barden Act¹² increased funding for vocational education and allowable uses by the states, and the modernizing economy increased demand for skilled workers.¹³ In this context, the Minnesota legislature passed a law establishing Area Vocational-Technical Schools.¹⁴

Formal Establishment and Initial Growth of AVTIs: 1945-1960

Area Vocational-Technical Schools or "institutes" (AVTIs), as they came to be called, would be administered by local school districts, with funding provided by the state Department of Education through reimbursement.¹⁵ AVTIs would grant no degrees, but prepare adults for jobs in agriculture, home economics, health, office, distributive, trade and industrial, and technical occupations. AVTIs were intended to be postsecondary in nature. Both high school graduates and nongraduates could enroll, but students were persuaded to complete high school prior to enrollment. AVTIs would be free to any Minnesota residents under 21 who had graduated from high school.¹⁶ Nongraduates over 16 could also attend free of charge, but were limited to the AVTI within their local school district.¹⁷

The first AVTI was established at Mankato in 1947 and offered courses in communications, electronics, electrical machinery, machine shop, tool and die, and internal combustion engines.¹⁸ AVTIs were later established in St. Cloud and Winona (1948), Thief River Falls (1949), Duluth (1950), Austin (1951), St. Paul (1952), Minneapolis (1955), Staples (1959), Wadena (1960), Willmar (1961), and Alexandria, Hibbing, and Eveleth (1962).¹⁹ Many of these AVTIs made use of surplus equipment from War Production Training programs.²⁰

Increased Proliferation of AVTIs: 1960-1980

Due in part to increased federal funding for vocational education through the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 (which funded training for unemployed workers) and especially the Vocational Education Act of 1963 (which allowed state vocational boards to use federal funds to construct new schools), AVTIs continued to proliferate in the 1960s.²¹ The following institutions were established in the proceeding years:

1964: Brainerd, Jackson

1965: Canby, Granite Falls

1966: Bemidji, Detroit Lakes, Faribault, Moorhead, Pine City

1967: Pipestone, Rochester

¹¹ Pub. L. No. 78-346.

¹² Pub. L. No. 79-586

¹³ MINN. TECH. COLLEGE SYSTEM, *supra* note 1, at 6.

¹⁴ [Laws 1945, Ch. 304](#).

¹⁵ *See id.*

¹⁶ MINN. DEPT. OF ED., *supra* note 10, at 26.

¹⁷ MINN. TECH. COLLEGE SYSTEM, *supra* note 1, at 11.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 8.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ MINN. TECH. COLLEGE SYSTEM, *supra* note 1, at 8.

²¹ *Id.* at 9-10.

1968: Albert Lea
1969: suburban Hennepin County
1970: Dakota County, Hutchinson, Ramsey-Washington Counties
1971: Red Wing
1972: East Grand Forks²²

“Intermediate school districts” (ISDs)—cooperative combinations of one or more school districts—also formed in the later 1960s with the primary purpose of jointly operating AVTIs. In 1967, the legislature authorized an ISD for Hennepin County “to accomplish jointly and cooperatively the acquisition, betterment, construction, maintenance, and operation of area vocational-technical schools.”²³ An ISD was also authorized in 1969 for Ramsey and Washington Counties²⁴ as well as Dakota County.²⁵

In the 1970s, concerns began to arise regarding redundancies between AVTIs and the state’s community colleges (two-year institutions which also offered terminal vocational programs). In 1967, the legislature had established the Higher Education Coordinating Commission (HECC) and gave it responsibility for comprehensive planning regarding postsecondary education in the state.²⁶ In 1971, the HECC’s submitted a report to the governor and legislature that, among other things, recommended a pause on authorizing new AVTIs “until such time as greater need and feasibility becomes evident”²⁷ and also recommended that community colleges and AVTIs in close proximity assess the possibility of merger.²⁸

The proliferation of AVTIs also increased costs to the state. This led to two major policy changes in the mid-70s. First, all vocational education was changed from funding on a reimbursement basis (i.e. based on past expenditures) to a current funding basis.²⁹ This required AVTIs to submit budget requests for future years and was intended to increase accountability for spending.³⁰ Second, state laws regarding tuition were changed. In 1977, the legislature amended state statute to allow AVTIs to charge tuition to adult vocational education students (previously it was required to be tuition-free for Minnesota residents under 21 years of age).³¹

Consolidation and Systematization of AVTIs: 1980-1990

By the early 80s there were 33 AVTIs across Minnesota, and enrollment in those AVTIs had increased dramatically. Between 1972 and 1982, average daily membership at AVTIs more than

²² *Id.* at 105.

²³ [1967 Laws, ch. 822.](#)

²⁴ [1969 Laws, ch. 775.](#)

²⁵ [1969 Laws, ch. 1060.](#)

²⁶ [1967 Laws, ch. 615.](#)

²⁷ HIGHER EDUCATION COORDINATING COMMISSION, REPORT TO THE GOVERNOR AND THE 1973 LEGISLATURE (Dec. 15, 1972), at p. 75, available [online](#).

²⁸ *Id.* at 124–125.

²⁹ [Laws 1976, ch. 271.](#)

³⁰ MINN. TECH. COLLEGE SYSTEM, *supra* note 1, at 12.

³¹ [Laws 1977, ch. 447, art. 5, § 6.](#)

doubled, growing from 16,256 students to 34,977 students.³² The majority—72 percent—of AVTIs’ revenues came from state appropriations (rather than tuition or other sources), and that state funding had more than tripled from the early 70s to the early 80s.³³

Concerns about redundancies between AVTIs and community colleges persisted, but these overlaps also offered opportunities for cooperation. For example, in 1981, the legislature authorized AVTIs to grant associates degrees in conjunction with a “collegiate institution” like a community college.³⁴ More significant than the overlap between AVTIs and community colleges, however, was the concern over duplication and redundancy within the AVTIs system itself.³⁵ The 1960s and 70s were both an “era of growth” and an “era of duplication” for the AVTIs.³⁶ As the Department of Education stated in its 1980 “long range plan” for AVTIs:

[Previously,] [a]ll one had to do was to look at an existing AVTI, build a new one, possibly a little bigger, but basically the same and with basically the same programs, and wait for the students to show up. . . . Today the rules of the game have changed. Duplication of a good program no longer brings out additional students, but it does increase expenditures. Today, there is a need that the postsecondary vocational technical system plan as a system rather than as individual AVTI’s to avoid costly duplication.³⁷

In the early 80s, then, the legislature was faced with significant programmatic duplication among AVTIs, high costs to the state, and the projection of “substantial enrollment declines.”³⁸ This led to significant budget cuts for AVTIs (resulting in program and staffing reductions),³⁹ as well as governance reforms and consolidation.

One of these reforms came in 1983, when the legislature established the Vocational Technical Education Board: a new 11-member AVTI governing board separate from the Department of Education that would focus on postsecondary and adult vocational education in a systematic way.⁴⁰ The legislature also mandated that, “[f]or increased financial efficiency and effectiveness in serving its community and in responding to changing enrollment needs, each

³² POST-SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AT MINNESOTA’S AREA VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL INSTITUTES, OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR (Feb. 9, 1983), at p. 7, available [online](#).

³³ *Id.* at 5.

³⁴ [Laws 1981, Ch. 353](#).

³⁵ “If only overlap within the AVTI system is considered, the percentage of AVTI programs overlapped drops only slightly, from 60 percent to 58 percent. This fact indicates that even if the community colleges offered no vocational programs, the AVTI system would have a significant problem with program overlap. In contrast, the percentage of community college programs overlapped drops from 49 percent to 27 percent if overlap with the AVTI s is excluded.” LEG. AUDITOR, *supra* n. 29 at 28.

³⁶ MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, LONG RANGE PLAN FOR THE OPERATION OF THE AREA VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL INSTITUTE SYSTEM (1980), at p. I-2.

³⁷ *Id.* at p. I-2–I-3.

³⁸ LEG. AUDITOR, *supra* n. 29 at 11. In actuality, enrollment remained rather stable and experienced “modest growth” in the 80s. MINNESOTA STATE BOARD OF VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL EDUCATION, REPORT ON ENROLLMENT GROWTH (January 1980), at p. 1.

³⁹ POST-SECONDARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION: FOLLOW-UP STUDY, OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR (March 1985), at p. ix, available [online](#).

⁴⁰ [1983 Laws, ch. 258, § 57](#).

AVTI and community college located in the same community or in nearby communities shall jointly develop a plan for cooperation.”⁴¹

In 1985, the legislature authorized any two or more school districts to combine to operate a “joint vocational technical district.”⁴² The first districts to take advantage of this combined the Canby AVTI, Jackson AVTI, Pipestone AVTI, and Granite Falls AVTI, to operate jointly as campuses of the “Southwestern Vocational Technical Institute.”⁴³ This regionalization would continue into the 90s. Colleges in Rochester, Austin, and Faribault merged to form Riverland Technical College in 1991.⁴⁴ Three intermediate school districts also operated technical colleges by the early 90s: Hennepin, Dakota County, and Northeast Metro.⁴⁵

In 1990, the AVTIs were renamed “technical colleges,” and Vocational Technical Education Board was renamed the “Technical College Board,” which would be headed by a “chancellor” rather than a “director.”⁴⁶ The fundamentals of governance and administration, however, remained unchanged. The state board would prepare systemwide budgets, allocate state and federal aid, and provide coordination and support services. While local school district (or—increasingly—intermediate or joint districts) would remain responsible for operating the technical colleges. Technical college staff would also remain school district employees.

The MnSCU Merger: 1990s

In 1991, the legislature passed a law requiring the merger of the state’s community colleges, state universities, and technical colleges into a single system by July 1, 1995.⁴⁷ Control and governance of the technical colleges (formerly “AVTIs”) would shift from school districts to the state and technical college employees would become state employees. Goals of the merger included: removing duplicative academic programming; achieving economies of scale by centralizing administration and student services; allowing for easier credit transfer among institutions; and centralizing funding to avoid favoritism and serve broader statewide interests.⁴⁸

Per the 1991 law, the merger was complete by July 1995 and the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system was created. The merger incorporated the technical colleges in the following cities into MnSCU:

Alexandria, Albert Lea, Anoka, Austin, Bemidji, Brainerd, Brooklyn Park, Canby, Detroit Lakes, Duluth, East Grand Forks, Eden Prairie, Eveleth, Faribault, Granite Falls, Hibbing, Hutchinson, Jackson, Minneapolis, Mahtomedi, Moorhead, North Mankato,

⁴¹ *Id.* at § 64.

⁴² [1985 Laws, ch. 23, § 6.](#)

⁴³ SYSTEM PLANNING REPORT, MINNESOTA STATE BOARD OF VOCATIONAL TECHNICAL EDUCATION (September 1986), at p. 6.

⁴⁴ HIGHER EDUCATION ADMINISTRATIVE AND STUDENT SERVICES SPENDING: TECHNICAL COLLEGES, COMMUNITY COLLEGES, AND STATE UNIVERSITIES, OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR (March 1992), at p. 48, available [online](#).

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 49.

⁴⁶ [1990 Laws, ch. 375.](#)

⁴⁷ [1991 Laws, ch. 356, art. 9.](#)

⁴⁸ The MnSCU Merger, OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR (August 2000), at p. 3, available [online](#).

Pine City, Pipestone, Red Wing, Rochester, Rosemount, St. Cloud, St. Paul, Staples, Thief River Falls, Wadena, Willmar, and Winona.⁴⁹

The missions of the technical colleges under the system were, according to the merger law, “offer vocational training and education to prepare students for skilled occupations that do not require a baccalaureate degree.”⁵⁰ One of the most complex aspects of the MnSCU merger was incorporating the technical colleges—which were managed by separate school districts—into the state.⁵¹ This was due in large part to the diversity of administrative systems that needed to be standardized and a number of labor relations issues that needed to be resolved.⁵²

As part of the merger a number of technical colleges were consolidated with nearby or already-co-located community colleges. 11 consolidated colleges arose between 1994 and 1996:⁵³

Consolidated College (location)	Previous Institutions
Central Lakes College (Brainerd, Staples)	Brainerd Community College; Brainerd/Staples Technical College
Century College (White Bear Lake)	Lakewood Community College; Northeast Metro Technical College
Hibbing Community College (Hibbing)	Hibbing Community College; Hibbing/Eveleth Technical College (Hibbing campus)
Lake Superior College (Duluth)	Duluth Community College Center; Duluth Technical College
Mesabi Range Community and Technical College (Eveleth, Virginia)	Mesabi Community College (Virginia); Hibbing/Eveleth Technical College (Eveleth campus)
Minneapolis Community and Technical College (Minneapolis)	Minneapolis Community College; Minneapolis Technical College
Minnesota West Community and Technical College (Canby, Granite Falls, Jackson, Pipestone, Worthington)	Worthington Community College; Southwestern Technical College (Canby, Granite Falls, Jackson, Pipestone)
Northland Community and Technical College (Thief River Falls)	Northland Community College; Northwestern Technical College (Thief River Falls campus)
Ridgewater College (Hutchinson, Willmar)	Willmar Community College; Hutchinson/Willmar Technical College
Riverland Community College (Albert Lea, Austin)	Austin Community College;

⁴⁹ [1995 Laws ch. 212, art. 4, § 14.](#)

⁵⁰ [1991 Laws, ch. 356, art. 2, § 1](#) (codified at [Minn. Stat. § 135A.052](#)).

⁵¹ See generally MINNESOTA STATE COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, TRANSITION OF TECHNICAL COLLEGES INTO STATE GOVERNMENT, OFFICE OF THE LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR (August 1996).

⁵² Under the merger, 18 technical college faculty bargaining units, which previously negotiated separate contracts with their governing school districts, would be reassigned into a single statewide bargaining unit. LEG. AUDITOR, *supra* n. 45, at 41.

⁵³ LEG. AUDITOR, *supra* n. 45, at table 3.4.

Consolidated College (location)	Previous Institutions
	Riverland Technical College (Austin campus); Mankato/Albert Lea Technical College (Albert Lea campus)
Rochester Community and Technical College (Rochester)	Rochester Community College; Riverland Technical College (Rochester campus)

Only ten technical colleges remained after the creation of the consolidated colleges:

- Alexandria Technical College (Alexandria)
- Anoka-Hennepin Technical College (Anoka)
- Dakota County Technical College (Rosemount)
- Hennepin Technical College (Brooklyn Park, Eden Prairie)
- Minnesota State College - Southeast Technical (Red Wing, Winona)
- Northwest Technical College (Bemidji, Detroit Lakes, East Grand Forks, Moorhead, Wadena)
- Pine Technical College (Pine City)
- South Central Technical College (Faribault, Mankato)
- St. Cloud Technical College (St. Cloud)
- St. Paul Technical College (St. Paul)⁵⁴

The legislature did not give the consolidated colleges a distinct mission, but instead stated that “consolidated community technical colleges shall offer the same types of instruction, programs, certificates, diplomas, and degrees as the technical colleges and community colleges offer.”⁵⁵ The creation of consolidated community and technical colleges was considered a key result and benefit of the MnSCU merger,⁵⁶ and the culmination of decades of efforts at reducing duplication and overlap between the old AVTIs and community colleges.

Career and Technical Education Today

Public postsecondary vocational education occurs today at Minnesota State’s⁵⁷ 26 state colleges. Secondary students are also able to access technical education at state colleges through postsecondary enrollment options (PSEO), which start as early as 10th grade for technical education courses.⁵⁸

Minnesota State is also the sole state agency authorized⁵⁹ to receive and disburse federal funds under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act, the 2018

⁵⁴ LEG. AUDITOR, *supra* n. 45, at table 1.2.

⁵⁵ [Laws 1997 ch. 183, art. 3, § 10](#) (codified at [Minn. Stat. § 135A.052](#)).

⁵⁶ LEG. AUDITOR, *supra* n. 45 at 37.

⁵⁷ “MnSCU” became “Minnesota State” after a rebranding effort in 2016.

⁵⁸ See [Minn. Stat. § 124D.09](#).

⁵⁹ See [Minn. Stat. § 136F.79](#).

reauthorization of which is referred to as the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act or “Perkins V.”

Perkins V provides federal grant funds intended to increase access to high-quality career and technical education (“CTE”) programs.⁶⁰ Funds are granted to school districts and consortia of districts with approved CTE programs and may be used for professional development or career counseling and guidance and to promote student attainment of academic and technical skills, upgrade equipment, or provide school- and work-based experiences. Minnesota State administers Perkins V in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Education and designated local “consortia” (partnerships of school districts and state colleges, of which there are 26 statewide).⁶¹ This cooperative model is intended to align CTE at the secondary and postsecondary levels to produce coordinated, nonduplicative sequences of academic and technical content.⁶² Minnesota’s total Perkins V grant award for fiscal year 2022 was \$20,524,984.⁶³

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⁶⁰ “Career and technical education” or “CTE” is the dominant term now for what would have previously been called “vocational” or “vocational-technical” education.

⁶¹ A list of local consortia leaders is available online [here](#).

⁶² See MINNESOTA 4-YEAR STATE PLAN: STRENGTHENING CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY (PERKINS V), MINNESOTA STATE CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION AND MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (2020), at p. 1, available [online](#); PERKINS V OPERATIONAL HANDBOOK, MINNESOTA STATE CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION AND MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (2019), at p. 13, available [online](#).

⁶³ See Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, Minnesota State Profile, available [online](#).