

VCIH Student Agreements

Welcome! If you're reading this, you're likely strongly considering joining the VCIH community and we're delighted to have your interest. We've written the following as a way to ensure that each student is fully informed about key aspects of our unique organization before enrolling. If you choose to join us in this inspiring, challenging, and wildly rewarding experiment in changing culture through herbal medicine, we want you to be all-in.

This is a long read, and you might find yourself taking breaks to reflect and consider the ideas presented--in fact, we hope you will! We invite you to get a cup of tea and make yourself comfortable, so you can spend some quality time with what we've shared here.

As you read, you'll see that each section finishes with an affirmation of understanding and agreement, followed by a space for your initials. Once you're ready, we ask that you sign each section to indicate your agreement to do your absolute best to uphold and enact each statement. If you have questions about anything you read here, we're happy to answer. Just get in touch. A fully initialed Student Agreement is needed to complete the enrollment process at VCIH.

After a decade of developing and tending VCIH, we've come to realize that we need to be more explicit with incoming students about how and why we do our work as an organization. There are many different kinds of herb schools and herbal communities and we want to be sure that our particular perspective and model is clear. In order to be true to our mission and values, we need our relationship with our students to be one of mutual benefit and positive collaboration. We ask that you not only spend time reading through our curriculum to decide if it will meet your learning goals, but also that you be fully committed to our mission, guiding principles, and vision, and aware of what investment and collaboration in our shared community looks like in practice: what we expect, what we can (and can't) offer, and how we will hold each other accountable.

In addition to reading this document, we ask that you read specific pages on our website which give details about our [vision and mission](#), our [sliding-scale clinics](#), and the [payment policies](#) for consultations and herbs. We also ask that you read the [descriptive pages](#) regarding the program(s) you wish to attend, including the class descriptions and relevant [faculty bios](#). We think it's most helpful to read these before continuing with this document. (Follow the links embedded in this paragraph to find the web pages referenced.)

OK! I've read those pages on the website. So far so good. _____ (your name)

Being a VCIH Student Serves the Mission and the Community - Students are Collaborators, Not Consumers

VCIH is a mission-driven, 501(c)3 non-profit organization. The founders, directors, faculty, staff, board members and many others have and continue to volunteer thousands of hours (in addition to paid hours) to make VCIH a reality and to keep it going. We are committed to this work because we believe in the potential and necessity of herbalism as a tool for change. We're privileged to be able to serve our community and we're grateful that, along with our clients, we're able to offer many unique learning opportunities to students that are mutually beneficial.

In addition, VCIH is committed to keeping tuition as accessible and affordable as possible and maintains hourly teaching rates below the national average for comparable education. In reality, student tuition doesn't cover the true value of this education and of becoming a member of the VCIH community.

Nonetheless, VCIH does need money (tuition) to persist in the current economic system, but is not profiting off of students or clients. In fact, we run on a tightly managed “shoe-string” budget, despite what our size and reach might suggest. Ultimately, VCIH aims to be an anti-capitalist institution, as we believe that capitalism is inherently exploitative and inequitable, and is therefore incongruous with healing.

Tuition is a vital contribution that students make, but student responsibility doesn't end there. Students contribute to the perpetuation of VCIH's mission and work as collaborators in the work of community herbalism, as a whole, not merely as passive consumers of an educational product. We ask students to commit to working in collaboration with VCIH in supporting the school, the community clinic, and the apothecary. Students in every program directly benefit from the work that is done in the clinic. The clinical experience of teachers greatly informs the education that students receive and is an essential part of VCIH's mission and values. This makes both the clinic and the VCIH apothecary essential to student learning and academic experience. Our clients provide faculty and students alike with countless opportunities to learn about and apply our craft and we all in turn contribute to their wellbeing and to the future wellbeing of clients to come.

I understand that all VCIH students are, by definition and commitment, in a mutually beneficial relationship with VCIH clients and community. What this means in practice is that students in every program will learn directly and indirectly from and about the clinic, while also contributing--through such experiences as gardening, harvesting, and medicine-making--in ways that serve not just students' educational experience, but also the larger mission of the organization. _____ (your initials)

Being a VCIH Student Requires Active Participation and Effort - When Everyone Shows Up, Everyone Benefits

We've put our full hearts, hands and minds into this work and community and it is continuously challenging and surprising us. It is exponentially fulfilling. We can promise that, if you decide to join us, it will be a combination of challenge and reward for you, too.

Most importantly, students are part of a classroom community that is itself a source of learning and growth. Each student plays a unique and vital role in the class, benefiting not just themselves, but their classmates. Participation and attendance carry the most significant weight in student evaluations in almost every course and we consider student contributions to collective learning to be an essential aspect of the curriculum in every program. We deeply value the experience and knowledge of each individual student, which serves to enrich everyone's learning.

We know that students come to VCIH with different experiences and expectations about education and about herbal education in particular. So, in an effort to be transparent, we've outlined our educational approach here. We are committed to whole-person education, addressing both the intellectual and emotional fluencies and skills relevant to herbalists. While we espouse no specific spiritual beliefs or practices, we also recognize the possibility of and make space for spiritual learning and development through working with plants and value (and sometimes share) individual practices and beliefs regarding spiritual dimensions of herbalism. Finally, we acknowledge the cultural prevalence of trauma and are concerned with its impacts on student learning and community participation. We strive to enact core principles of trauma-informed education, as well as clinical practice.

VCIH offers the curriculum in a particular format and using a variety of educational methods, selected over years of trial and error and based on faculty experience and previous student's feedback. We draw on a variety of progressive and transgressive educational models, with particular focus on embodied and applied learning. We recognize that some content and/or learning formats will be more or less challenging for

students, depending on their specific learning styles and interests, and we see this as an opportunity for each student to advocate for themselves and ask for the support or challenge they need. It can also be an opportunity for students to stretch--to try new learning methods, approach familiar topics from new angles, and even practice increasing tolerance for struggle while learning.

Particularly in the Family and Clinical programs, students are asked to do substantial work outside of class, especially in preparation for in-class learning. Some classes make significant use of online resources, some require group work outside and inside of class time, and some require project-based, hands-on work. Students who are not able to devote substantial time to work outside of class in a manner that follows the schedule of the program will not get the full value of the program and are also not likely to succeed in the program.

Also in reference to the clinical program, we feel that part of VCIH's role as a school is to ensure that people entering professional herbal practice are prepared and likely to practice in a safe, ethical, responsible and effective manner. Faculty will address any and all concerns with a student's capacity and consistency in demonstrating sound critical thinking and research skills, clinical judgement, emotional maturity and stability, and receptivity to feedback. Faculty will discuss concerns with the student and the clinical program director, who will work with the student to create a plan for improvement. Failure to improve may result in dismissal from the program.

Finally, we are here to help and work with you to get everything you can out of this experience. However, we are also humans, and a small group of humans at that, holding a dynamic tension between the needs and desires of 65-75 students, hundreds of clients, the plants, our larger mission and vision, our budget, and our own self-care. Please know that we want all of the feedback that you have to give and we will offer everything we can to support your specific experience. And, we will also set boundaries around what we are willing and able to do in order to maintain our personal and organizational sustainability.

As a student at Vermont Center for Integrative Herbalism, I recognize that I am responsible for my own learning. I will be given many opportunities to learn--from the teachers, my classmates, the plants, the clients, and the community. I recognize that to access the full extent of what VCIH has to offer, I must actively engage with, collaborate in, and ultimately take responsibility for my learning process. I will speak up when I need support and bring concerns and challenges to faculty and program directors promptly and respectfully, while recognizing that not all requests may be fulfilled.

I recognize that, at times, I will likely be challenged to step out of my comfort zone in my learning and I understand that this is an expected and even valuable part of the process. I understand that my learning and participation is not only for my own benefit, but is also essential to the learning of my classmates and the greater VCIH community. _____ (your initials)

Being a VCIH Student Means Studying and Practicing Herbalism as a Tool for Collective Healing and Liberation

We know that health is not a goal or characteristic of the individual. Instead, we understand health and healing to be a property of social and ecological systems--an individual cannot be healthy in a sick society nor in a sick environment. We believe that many of the systems operating in and defining modern industrialized culture are at the root of social and ecological dysfunctions which cause harm and prevent health in individuals in both overt and subtle ways.

In our clinics, we see racism, capitalism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, ableism--and, unfortunately, many more manifestations of injustice--creating harmful conditions for those targeted and marginalized,

impacting health and access to means of healing. We see herbalism as a powerful tool to counter some of this harm, a tool of healing and justice. We believe that dismantling these systems of domination is integral to the work of herbalists, not just on behalf of our clients, but in support of liberation and justice for everyone and the planet, our home.

We recognize that herbalism, as a tool, can also be used to perpetuate harmful power dynamics, and we work to disrupt the colonialist narratives and practices often found in Western herbalism, particularly as practiced by white herbalists of European descent. For example, we strive to affirm and honor the many contributions of Native people to North American Western herbalism, while avoiding further inappropriate use or exploitation of this traditional knowledge. Further, we work to understand and reconcile the relationships that Western herbalists have with other traditional systems, such as Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine, in the context of colonization and capitalism. We also know that herbalism is sometimes used to further harmful health dogmas, perpetuating such practices as body-shaming, disease-shaming, fatphobia, ableism and transphobia under the guise of healing.

With all of this in mind, we support students to acknowledge and explore their unexamined beliefs and habits, as well as their culturally determined access to social and economic resources as a first step in understanding the ways they may participate in unintentional harm to others. With increased awareness, we can leverage our privilege to take action in a spirit of partnership and solidarity. We believe the practice of herbalism can be one such direct action.

At the same time, we acknowledge and value the experiences of students who lack access to certain kinds of resources, power or privilege due to systemic oppression. We recognize that the classroom and learning experience itself can be a place where power dynamics loom large, and we work to create a shared space of care and accountability among students and between students and staff. We offer support and encouragement for building healthy boundaries and identifying self-care strategies, while increasing capacity to encounter the pain and grief that often accompanies clinical work and everyday life in an unjust world.

We understand that this work can bring up a lot for each of us--and what we grapple with will be different based on our experiences and backgrounds. For some, it can be difficult to be witnessed in the process of learning and growing in this area, but we believe that the strength and support of a community doing similar work can be a resource. While we as individual faculty members don't have the capacity to give every student personalized support around their self-work in this area, we do dedicate class time to this work and do our best to connect students with extensive resources specific to their needs and interests, beyond what is offered in class.

Ultimately, we want to increase our individual and collective capacity for connection, allyship, and resilience, especially in the face of discomfort, so that we can do the work of advancing social justice. We believe that herbalism is a valuable form of activism, and that the same skills that are developed doing the hard work of social justice are essential to becoming skilled herbalists. The ability of each class to collectively support and trust each other and to work through challenges is part of building clinical competence and ultimately, offering excellent care, whether to friends or future clients. In many ways, we entrust our students to be the face of VCIH and to embody our commitment to justice through their interactions with the wider community, whether in our clinics or further afield.

We recognize that all of this is hard work and it is work in progress for us all. While we know that we are not now and will not ever do this work perfectly, we as directors and faculty are committed to:

- doing it anyway;
- making mistakes, being imperfect, learning and doing better;

- seeking and receiving feedback openly;
- giving feedback with sincerity and clarity.

All of this said, we want you to know that we invite and celebrate each person's authentic and unique self, and see diversity of experiences and perspectives as a strength, rather than an obstacle. We're working to build an environment of trust in which we can offer each other compassion and strive towards reciprocal understanding and learning. Ultimately, we understand that students come with different levels of exposure to social justice work and we are happy to have you join us exactly as you are. We ask only that you commit to explore and learn about herbalism as a tool for healing and liberation for all.

I understand that learning about herbalism at VCIH will involve reflecting on my personal relationships to power and privilege, as well as developing a greater understanding of systemic oppression and its incompatible relationship with human and planetary health. I agree that this is part of the work of an herbalist. I will contribute to conversations and strategies around practicing herbalism in ways that reduce harm and actively work against oppression. I understand that this sometimes means having hard conversations and I will participate with respect and compassion, to the greatest extent that I am able. I also commit to self-care as a priority in my education and personal development and will create safety for myself and gather supportive resources, as I need them. ____ (your initials)

For clinical students:

I understand that the development of personal awareness and agency in dismantling oppressive systems is central to successful clinical work at VCIH. I understand that I will be expected to extend welcoming, competent care in an anti-oppressive framework to all who visit the clinic. ____ (your initials)

Thank you for reading and considering what we've shared here. We're grateful for your attention to our deepest hopes and vision for this shared work. We hope to welcome you soon.

We offer gratitude to our colleagues at POCA Tech, a Community Acupuncture school in Portland, Oregon, for their inspiration as we crafted this document. Their dedication to and clear articulation of a liberatory framework for education and healthcare encouraged us to make our own intentions and commitments more visible.