

# vsac research brief

## Vermont students understand value of higher education

*Findings from VSAC survey of Vermont high school class of 2007*

During the next decade, the number of high school graduates in Vermont is projected to decline by 21 percent. This trend poses a critical challenge for the state, because more than two-thirds of Vermont's fastest growing jobs require postsecondary education. Just to maintain current numbers of college-bound graduates, the proportion of Vermont students who pursue education or training after high school must increase from 70 percent, the level achieved in 2005, to nearly 90 percent.

Fortunately, according to a VSAC survey, nearly 75 percent of the Vermont high school class of 2007 pursued postsecondary education or training on a full- or part-time basis in the fall following graduation.<sup>1</sup> This represents an increase of nearly five percentage points from 2005, the last time VSAC conducted a follow-up survey with graduates, and 10 percentage points in the last decade (Figure 1). In addition, even if students didn't continue immediately, the vast majority believed they would continue their education at some point. Only 4 percent of graduates surveyed reported that a high school diploma was the highest credential they planned to obtain. Among students who did not enroll in the fall of 2007, more than a third had plans to do so by the fall of 2008.



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**Figure 1. Vermont postsecondary education continuation rates**



<sup>1</sup> When reporting aspiration or continuation rates, we include any kind of postsecondary education or training — not just programs leading to a degree or certificate.

However, other survey findings revealed areas of continuing concern. For example, the continuation rate of first-generation students — those whose parents hadn't attended college — still trails the rate for other students. And, although the difference appears to be narrowing, a sizable gender gap in continuation persists. In addition, there's a gender gap in choice of majors, with each gender underrepresented in certain key occupational areas. Finally, parent expectations and availability of career and postsecondary information continue to play vital roles in students' post-high school activities; ways to capitalize on those factors should be explored and pursued.

The good news is that the vast majority of high school graduates understand the importance of continuing their education or training after high school. The state's goal of increasing Vermonters' educational attainment rests on students' ability to navigate the critical stages of postsecondary aspiration, continuation, and completion. Findings from this study underscore the need to find ways to help students explore education and career options that will enable them to engage in lifelong learning. It also identifies the types of students to target in order to meet state goals. Initiatives that support nontraditional career exploration and choices for boys and girls, or that provide targeted support to first-generation students and their parents, could influence future generations to continue education or training beyond high school while also benefiting the state.

For the class of 2007, VSAC redesigned the survey it typically uses a year after graduation to determine what students in a particular class actually do after high school; this survey determines the state's continuation rate. In the summer of 2008, 1,628 graduates of the Vermont high school class of 2007 were randomly selected to participate in the survey, which was conducted by Cornell University's Survey Research Institute (SRI). More than 62 percent, or 1,001 students, responded. Based on this sample, the continuation rate for the class of 2007 had a 95-percent confidence interval with a margin of error of +/-2.9 percent.

In addition to producing the continuation rate, this study provided detailed information about graduates' post-high school experiences. For example, graduates enrolling in college pursued degrees in majors that the state has identified as high need: science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM, 21 percent) and health and related clinical sciences (11 percent). Three-quarters of graduates who entered the workforce rather than a postsecondary program reported receiving some sort of on-the-job training.

Survey findings also suggest that there continue to be missed opportunities for increasing career awareness and exploration in general, as are focused approaches for increasing aspiration and continuation rates among particular segments of the population. Consistent with previous findings, certain groups are more likely to continue their studies or training immediately after high school:

- Females were more likely than males to enroll in postsecondary education within six months of high school graduation (79.2 percent versus 70.2 percent). For the class of 2005, 75.7 percent of females and 64.1 percent of males reported enrolling. This gender gap has existed at both the state and national levels for some time.
- Graduates who said they received information before high school about postsecondary education options were more likely to continue their studies immediately than those who first received information after the 9th grade (81 percent versus 77.2 percent). Most graduates reported receiving

some sort of information about college before graduating high school. High school graduates who reported not receiving any information (4.2 percent of the class) were much less likely to enroll (52.6 percent).

Parental education and aspirations continued to play a pivotal role:

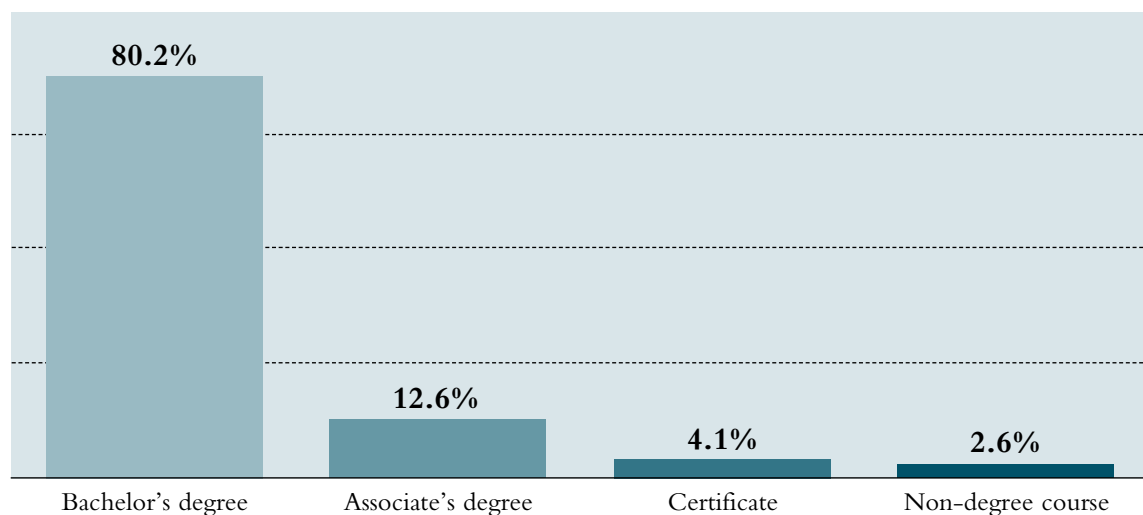
- Graduates whose parents had participated in some form of postsecondary education were more likely to continue their education immediately after high school (81.6 percent) than those whose parents had no college experience (52.4 percent). This represented an increase from 2005 among students with college-experienced parents (77.2 percent), but no change for first-generation students (52 percent).
- Graduates who perceived their parents had a clear expectation about what they should do after high school, whether it be to continue their schooling or enter the workforce, were more likely to enroll (81.1 percent) than those who reported that their parents didn't express a clear preference for their post-high school activities (56.7 percent).

Looking ahead, graduates were about as likely to see themselves living in Vermont at the end of six years (47.7 percent) as somewhere else (44.9 percent), with only 8 percent not having a clear sense. However, students who immediately entered some form of postsecondary education or training program were less likely (44.1 percent) to plan on remaining in Vermont than students who did not pursue education (58.3 percent).

Those who said it was unlikely they would remain in Vermont cited three main reasons: the belief that there were more job opportunities outside Vermont, the assumption that they could earn more outside Vermont, and the appeal of living in a different type of environment (for example, more urban or diverse).

Overwhelmingly, college-goers were enrolled as full-time students (94 percent). In addition, eight out of 10 students were enrolled in a bachelor's degree program (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Types of degrees students pursue**



Overall, college-goers went to institutions near and far — in 35 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada. Half (51.1 percent) of college-goers enrolled in public institutions, 44.6 percent attended private institutions, and 4.3 percent enrolled in for-profit or proprietary institutions.

Twenty-one percent of college-goers attended one of the Vermont State Colleges, 12.3 percent attended the University of Vermont, and 10.2 percent attended one of Vermont's independent institutions. The share of Vermonters attending out-of-state institutions was 56.6 percent, an increase of 3 percentage points since 2005. Sixty-six percent of students leaving the state attended institutions in the other New England states or New York.

Students working toward a two- or a four-year degree reported pursuing a variety of majors; however, the most popular were business and related areas of study (reported by 15 percent of the degree-seeking students), health and related clinical sciences (11 percent), education (7 percent), and engineering (7 percent). Taken as a whole, two- and four-year STEM majors accounted for nearly 20 percent of all majors reported.

Gender differences were evident in a few majors in high-need areas, signaling an opportunity to market careers differently. For example, males were underrepresented in majors classified as health professions and related clinical science, while females were underrepresented in engineering. Only 37 percent of STEM majors were pursued by females.

Nearly 59 percent of the graduates who did not immediately pursue education in the fall of 2007 were male. Most of these graduates worked full or part time in the fall of 2007 (79 percent), 8 percent enlisted in the military, and the remainder were unemployed.

Among those who entered the workforce, more than 78 percent worked full time (more than 31 hours a week). The primary type of work reported was in sales (27 percent), food preparation and serving (19 percent), and construction (14 percent). Once again, gender differences were a factor. The top occupational categories for females were sales (32 percent), food preparation and serving (27 percent), and personal care such as child or home care (19 percent). For males, the top occupational areas were sales (22 percent), construction (20 percent), and food preparation and serving (13 percent). More than 25 percent of males reported working in other occupations such as agriculture. More than 86 percent reported their jobs provided little (less than one month) or no on-the-job training.

Full-time workers earned an average of \$11.15 per hour, with males averaging about \$1 more (\$11.65) than females (\$10.57). Although higher than the state's minimum wage (\$7.68 in FY08), the hourly earnings reported by full-time workers were significantly lower than the Vermont livable wage for a single person with no children (\$16.75 per hour). Most full-time workers held jobs that did not offer employer-based fringe benefits. Forty-four percent reported getting paid vacations or sick days, less than 43 percent reported having medical insurance, and 29 percent reported receiving retirement savings or pension plans.

*VSAC redesigned the 2007 survey with the help of an advisory committee consisting of researchers from the Vermont State Colleges, the University of Vermont, private colleges in Vermont, and the Vermont Department of Education.*