

vsac research brief

First-generation college-going rates increase in last decade

Findings from VSAC survey of Vermont high school class of 2008 — actual activities

Vermont Student Assistance Corporation's most recent senior survey indicates that Vermont has made progress in its goal to increase the percentage of recent high school graduates who aspire to and enroll in postsecondary education or training. Vermont's state college system has benefitted from this trend, with a larger share of the state's students choosing to enroll at one of the five institutions that make up the Vermont State Colleges (VSC).

First-generation students experience gains, challenges.

During the last decade, the postsecondary continuation rate of high school graduates whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree — referred to as “first-generation students” — increased 12 percentage points, from 52 to 64 percent. This increase corresponds to a similar shift in parents' expectations. From 1998 to 2008, the percentage of first-generation students who said their parents wanted them to continue their education after high school, rather than enter the workforce, increased from 56 percent to 61 percent.

Despite the gains in college-going rates among first-generation students, they continue to lag behind those whose parents do have a bachelor's degree (85 percent of these students continue their studies). In addition, the well-documented gender gap in college participation is especially pronounced among first-generation students. The continuation rate for first-generation males was 57 percent, compared to 70 percent for first-generation females. In contrast, among students whose parents have at least a bachelor's degree, the continuation rate was 83 percent for males and 88 percent for females — a gender gap of only five percent.

More high school graduates follow through with education plans.

Nine out of 10 high school graduates in the class of 2008 pursued some form of postsecondary education or training in the fall following graduation or were planning to do so at some point. More than 73 percent of graduates reported continuing their



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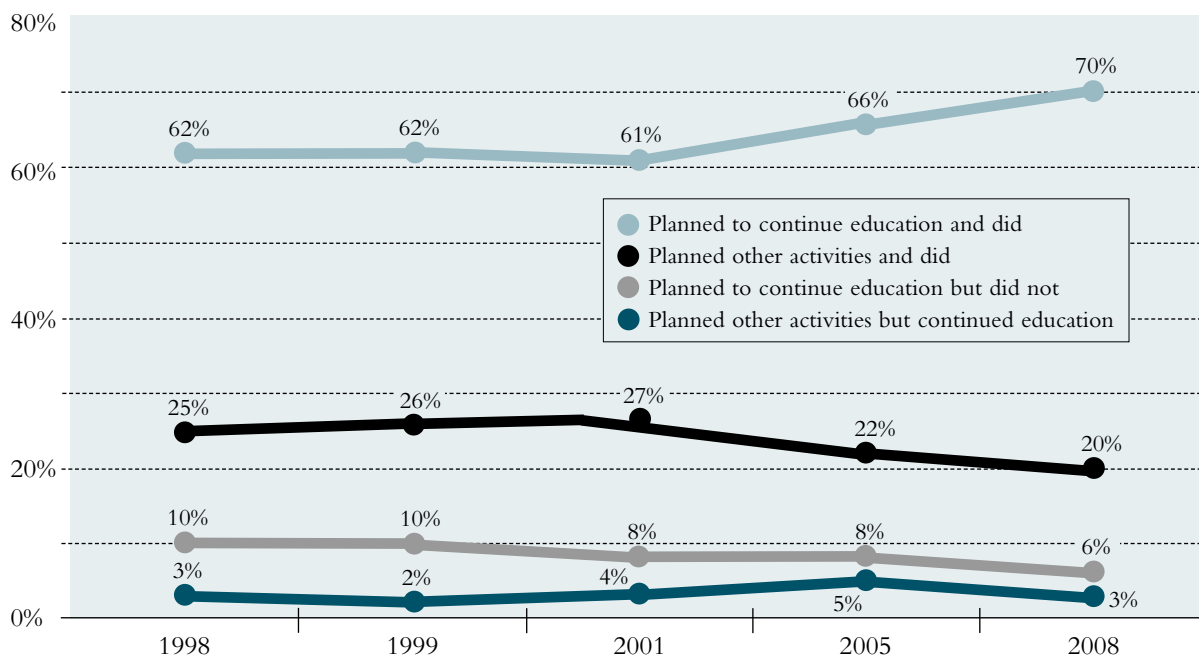
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education immediately following high school, while 18 percent said they intended to enroll later. Of the remainder, five percent were undecided and four percent said they would not continue their education. These findings are consistent with prior senior surveys.

Interestingly, data suggest that high school graduates today are more likely to stick to their post-high school education plans than they were a decade ago. In the class of 2008, 70 percent of high school graduates followed through with their plans to continue their education. In 1998, the percentage of graduates who planned to go on to postsecondary studies and then did so was eight points lower, 62 percent (Figure 1). At the same time, the percentage of graduates who veered from plans to continue education immediately following high school decreased from 10 percent in 1998 to six percent in 2008.

Figure 1. Students’ post-high school plans and actual activities from 1998 to 2008



Fewer graduates planning to work, join the military, enter a registered apprenticeship, or become a homemaker after high school followed through with those plans. In 1998, 25 percent of graduates planning these activities after high school followed through with those plans. Although this rate increased to 27 percent in 2001, it dropped to 20 percent in 2008.

Class of 2008 graduates who planned to continue, but did not, may not have been as well prepared for college as their peers, as gauged by their self-reported grade point averages and completion of a higher-level math class. Additionally, a higher percentage of these graduates expressed major concerns about their ability to pay for college (Table 1). First-generation students make up the majority (67 percent) of this group.

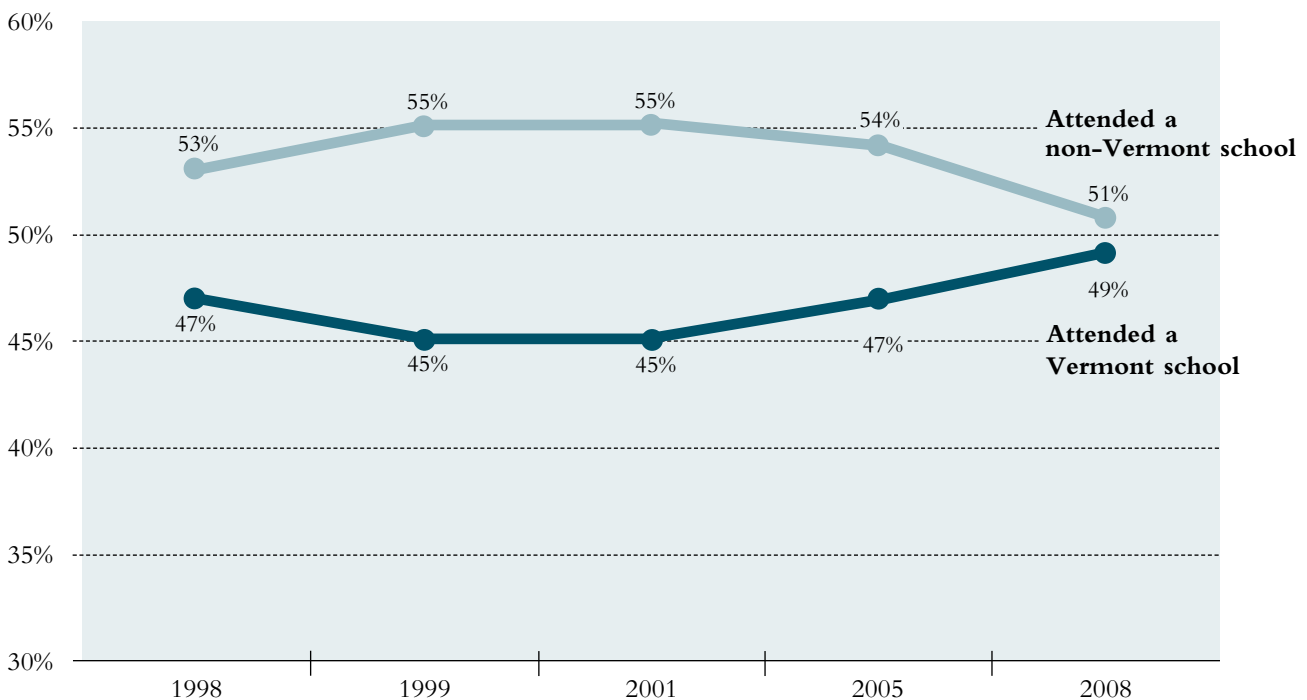
Table 1. Class of 2008 college-bound seniors: enrollment status one year after high school

As a high school senior:	Planned to, but did not, continue education	Planned to, and did, continue education
Earned an A or B high school GPA	71%	90%
Completed algebra II	70%	93%
Had major concerns about paying for college	33%	17%

Nearly half of college-going youth are choosing to study in Vermont; gains for the VSC.

Although a majority of first-year college students still leave Vermont to continue their studies, a higher proportion are favoring Vermont schools. In 2001, 45 percent of immediate continuers enrolled at Vermont schools. In 2008, 49 percent of those pursuing higher education remained in Vermont to continue their studies, the highest percentage in 10 years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. In-state and out-of-state enrollment from 1998 to 2008



Much of the growth is attributable to the percentage of students who enroll in the Vermont State Colleges. In the fall of 2008, a quarter of students pursuing postsecondary studies were doing so at one of the VSC institutions. This represents a six-point increase since 1998, when 19 percent of students went to the VSC. Notably, the percentage of students who attended Community College of Vermont (CCV) doubled, from four to eight percent.

The profile of recent high school graduates who enroll at CCV has changed in the last decade (as shown in Table 2). Although CCV still serves primarily first-generation students, these students are more likely to enroll on a full-time basis than in the past. The majority have completed a so-called gateway course, such as higher level math, while in high school. CCV students today also have higher educational aspirations; that is, more students intend to ultimately obtain a bachelor’s degree.

Table 2. Student profile: recent VT high school graduates at CCV

	1998	2008
First-generation	69%	67%
Enrolled full-time	39%	56%
Completed algebra II	45%	71%
Planned to obtain a bachelor’s degree or higher	55%	65%

Taken together, these findings are indicative of the gains being made among high school graduates whose parents have not completed college. These first-generation students are perhaps better prepared than they were a decade ago, have higher aspirations, and have parents who seemingly support those aspirations. These are all important factors in college enrollment and persistence.

Qualitative research undertaken as part of VSAC’s *Start Where You Are* college access initiative suggests that low-income and first-generation students prefer to remain close to their homes and communities. Growth in the share of students going to the Vermont State Colleges, particularly the Community College of Vermont, seems to support this finding.

Senior survey findings underscore the challenges facing policy makers who want to engage more students in postsecondary education or training — particularly first-generation students, who represent 51 percent of the population but less than 44 percent of continuers. More research is needed to determine what would motivate these students to aspire to and enroll in college. Knowing when and how to provide additional information or resources to Vermonters whose parents are not college graduates would likely increase their college-going rates.

To learn more about the VSAC Senior Survey, visit www.vsac.org.