



The Vermont High School Class of 2024

Postsecondary Plans

Executive Summary

Every two years, VSAC surveys all high school seniors. This research brief presents findings from the Vermont Class of 2024, the most recent Senior Survey, and compares these data to those from the Classes of 2018 and 2022. This allows comparison with the most recent class surveyed and with a class from before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of the research brief was to gather information about seniors' post-high school plans, and to determine what proportion of the class planned to pursue further education or training in the fall of 2024 (referred to as the "aspiration rate") and to consider changes in aspirations over time. Based on our previous research, we examined students' postsecondary aspirations through the lens of two key demographic factors: students' gender and parents' educational attainment. National data suggest that the percentage of students who expect to earn a bachelor's degree has declined over the last 20 years (Simon, 2025). This decline is also seen in the results of the Vermont Senior Survey.

These trend data demonstrate:

- There was a slight increase in students' intentions to pursue additional training or education after high school compared to the Class of 2022, but still not as high as in prior years.
- A rebound in aspiration rates by parent education attainment since 2022, but still falling short of the aspiration rates of previous years.
- The aspiration rate for first-generation males was 7.6 percentage points higher than the class of 2022, while continuing to decline among second-generation males.
- Compared to 2018, fewer students report that parents want them to continue their postsecondary education/training immediately after high school, regardless of student gender and parental educational status.

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Lastly, we present findings about students' postsecondary plans, both those who planned to continue their studies immediately after high school and those who planned to enter the workforce.

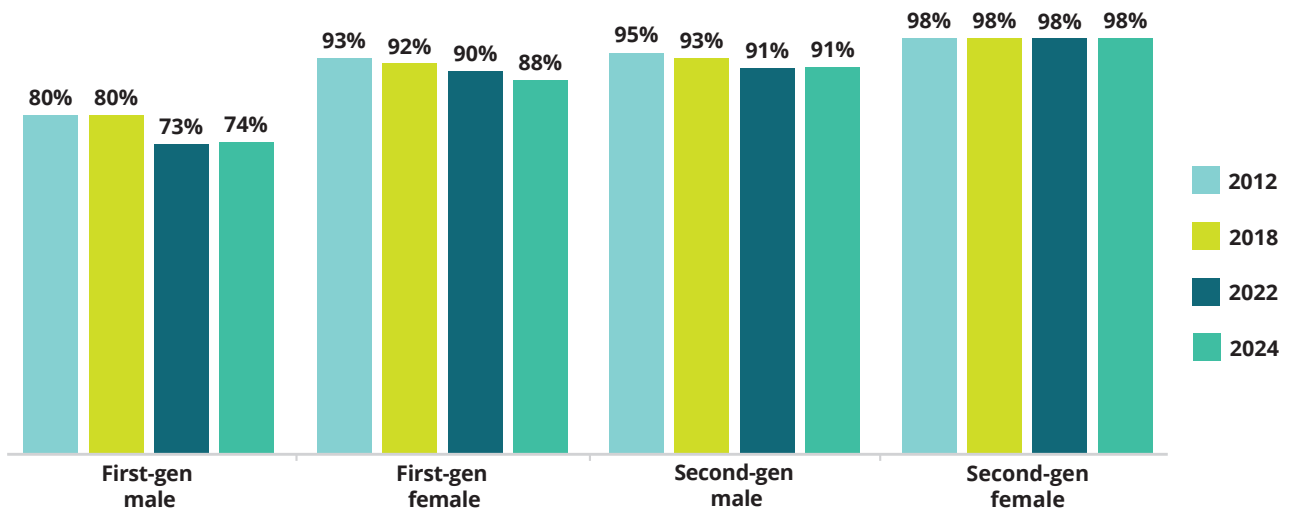


Ever Thought of Enrolling After High School

For the Class of 2024, 90 percent of high school seniors reported that at some point they had thought they would continue their education after high school. This is unchanged from 2022, when 89 percent of the class reported having planned to continue their education immediately.

We define first-generation students as those whose parent (s) or guardian(s) have not completed a four-year degree. Second-generation students are those whose parents have at least a bachelor’s degree. First-generation male students have traditionally been less likely to report ever having considered going to college after high school (see below). There was a 1 percentage point increase from 2022 (73 percent) to 2024 (74 percent) among first-generation males who reported at some point continuing their education, significantly lower than the 80 percent reported by the Classes of 2012 and 2018. Both second-generation male and first-generation female students in the Class of 2024 continued the steady decline since 2012 in ever having planned to continue their education immediately after graduation.

Figure 1. Ever aspired by gender and parent educational attainment

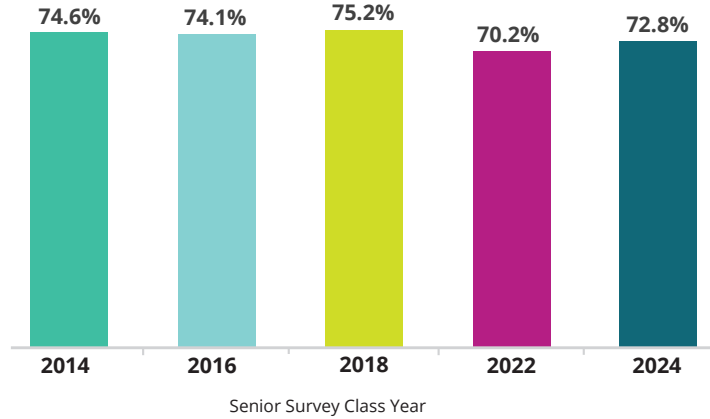


Plans To Continue Education or Training

The Senior Survey takes place in the spring of senior year. It collects information on whether seniors plan to continue their education in the fall or pursue other activities, such as working or joining the military.

The aspiration rate is defined as the percentage of students who report that they plan to continue their studies in the fall after graduating from high school by attending a 2-year or 4-year college or enrolling in a professional certificate program. The aspiration rate had been consistent, hovering around 75 percent since the Class of 2008, until there was a significant drop in 2022 to about 70 percent. The aspiration rate for the Class of 2024 increased to 73 percent.

Figure 2. Percent of high school graduates who planned to enroll in the fall (aspiration rate)

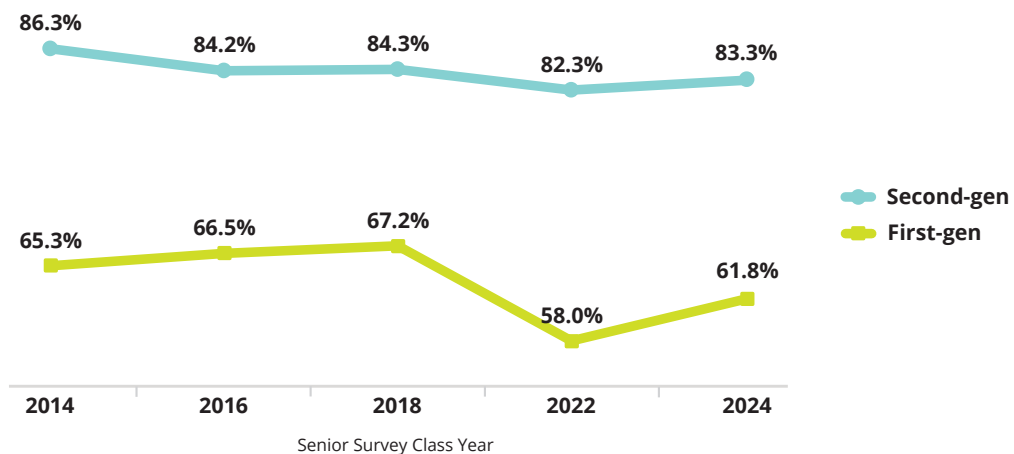


Aspiration Rate by Parents’ Educational Attainment

Our previous research has shown that parental educational attainment is an important indicator of students’ educational outcomes, including postsecondary aspirations (see below). There has been a consistent and sizable gap in aspiration rates between first- and second-generation students over time.

For the Class of 2024, there was a 21.5-percentage point difference in aspiration rates between first- and second-generation high school seniors. This is an improvement over the 24-percentage-point difference observed for the Class of 2022, but it is still significantly higher than the 17-percentage-point gap for the Class of 2018.

Figure 3. Aspiration rate by parents’ educational attainment

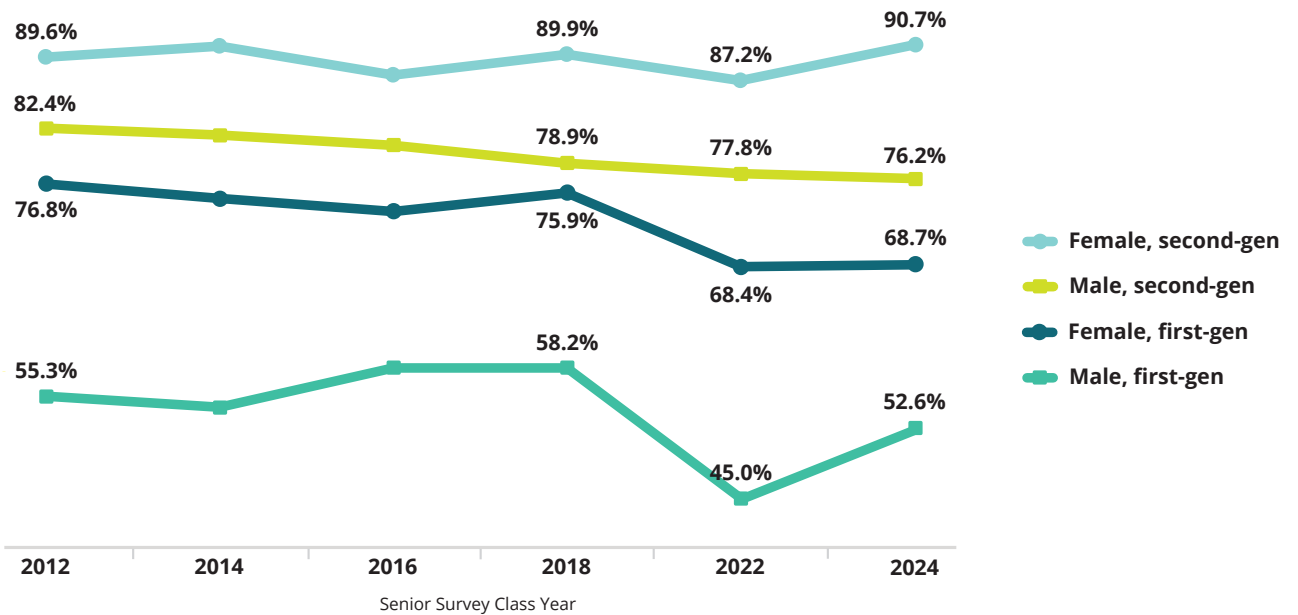


Aspiration Rate by Gender and Parents' Educational Attainment

Our previous findings have shown significant gender differences in postsecondary aspirations, with a higher percentage of female seniors (regardless of parental education) planning to continue their education or training immediately after high school than their male counterparts (VSAC, 2023). The gender gap in aspiration narrowed among first-generation seniors (a difference of 16 percentage points) but widened among second-generation seniors (a difference of 14.5 percentage points).

As with previous cohorts, first-generation male students in the Class of 2024 had the lowest aspiration rate of all students. The aspiration rate rose from 45 percent in 2022 to 53 percent among first-generation male students in the fall of 2024, but it is still down from 58 percent in 2018.

Figure 4. Aspiration rate by gender and parents' educational attainment

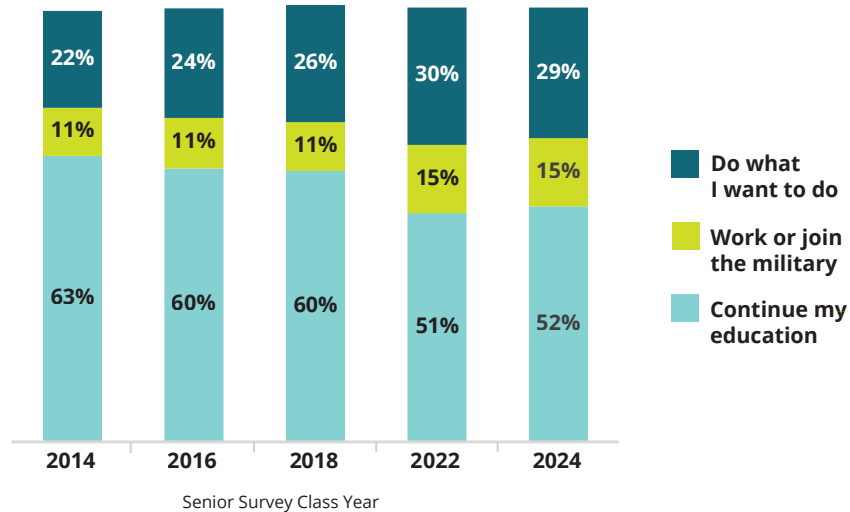


Perception of Parents' Aspiration for Students' Fall Plans

Students reported their parents' opinions on their postsecondary plans—whether the student should continue their education, enter the workforce, or whether parents would support whatever decision the student made.

Students' perceptions of what their parents feel they should do in the fall following high school graduation have been shifting over time. The percentage of students in the Class of 2024 (52 percent) who reported that their parents wanted them to continue their education was similar to that of the Class of 2022 (51 percent) but remains significantly lower than what has been reported by earlier cohorts.

Figure 5. Students report what their parents feel they should do in the fall

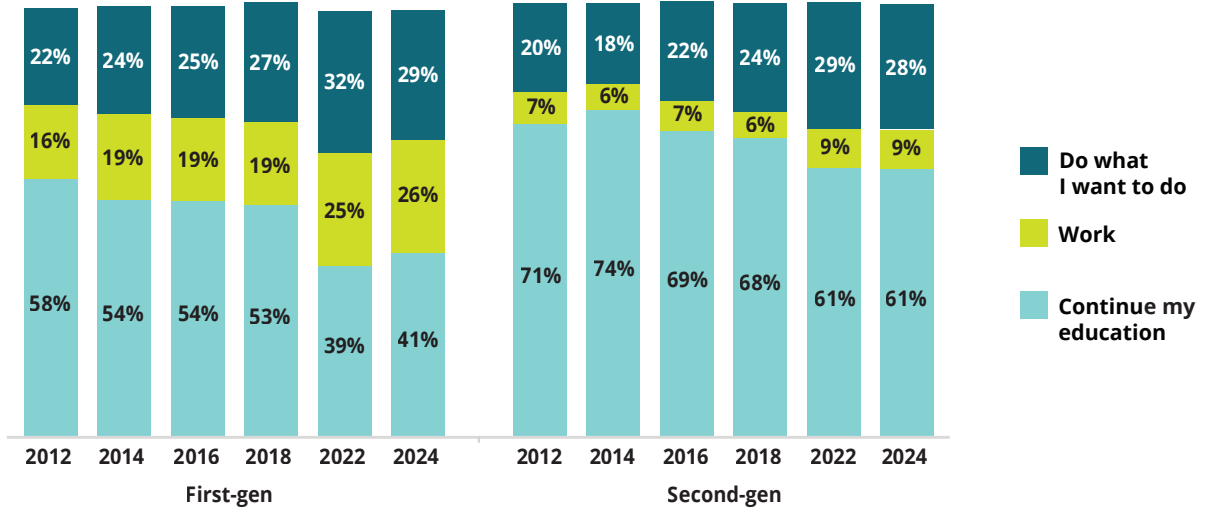


Perception of Parents' Aspiration for Students' Education, by Parents' Educational Attainment

Our research suggests that the proportion of students reporting that their parents wanted them to continue their education has been declining over time, regardless of parental education attainment. However, for the Class of 2024, there was a slight increase in first-generation students' perception of their parents' wanting them to continue their education.

While the gap in parental aspirations for education between first- and second-generation students remains significant, it decreased between 2022 and 2024. More than one-quarter of first-generation students reported that they believe their parents want them to either work or join the military after graduating, representing a 10-percentage-point increase from what this cohort reported in 2012.

Figure 6. First- and second-generation students report what their parents feel they should do in the fall

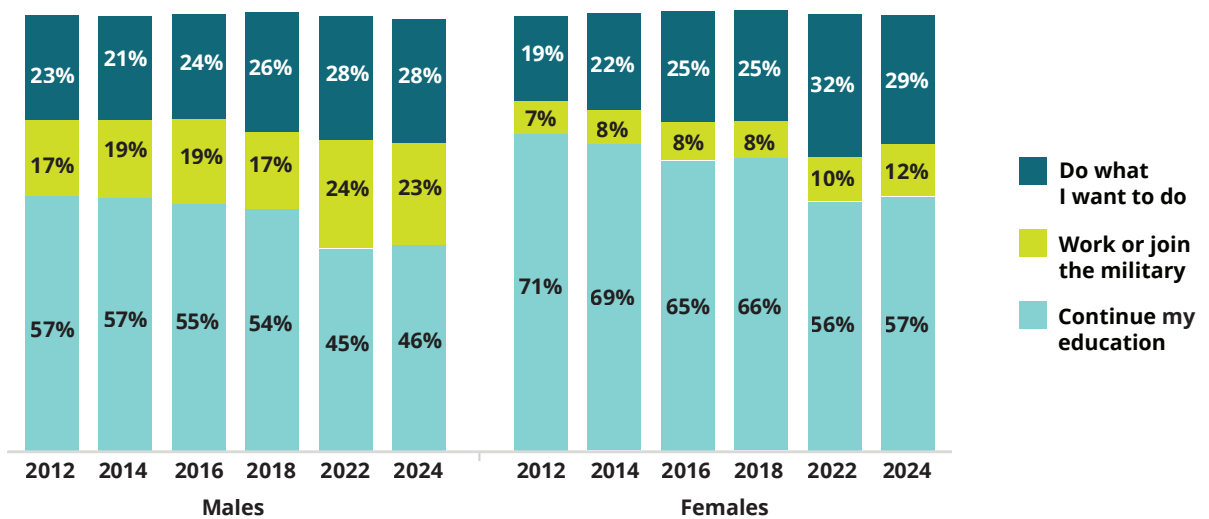


Perception of Parents’ Aspiration for Students’ Education, by Gender

There were gender differences in students’ perceptions of what their parents wanted them to do after high school. These gender differences are consistent over time and indicate that male students are less likely than female students to report that their parents want them to continue their education or training after high school.

Furthermore, our data suggest that, regardless of gender, the share of students reporting that their parents want them to continue their studies is declining over time. Since 2012, students’ perceptions of their parents’ aspirations for them to continue their education have declined by 11 percentage points among males and 14 percentage points among females.

Figure 7. Male and female students report what their parents feel they should do in the fall



Regional Differences in Aspiration by Parent Education Level

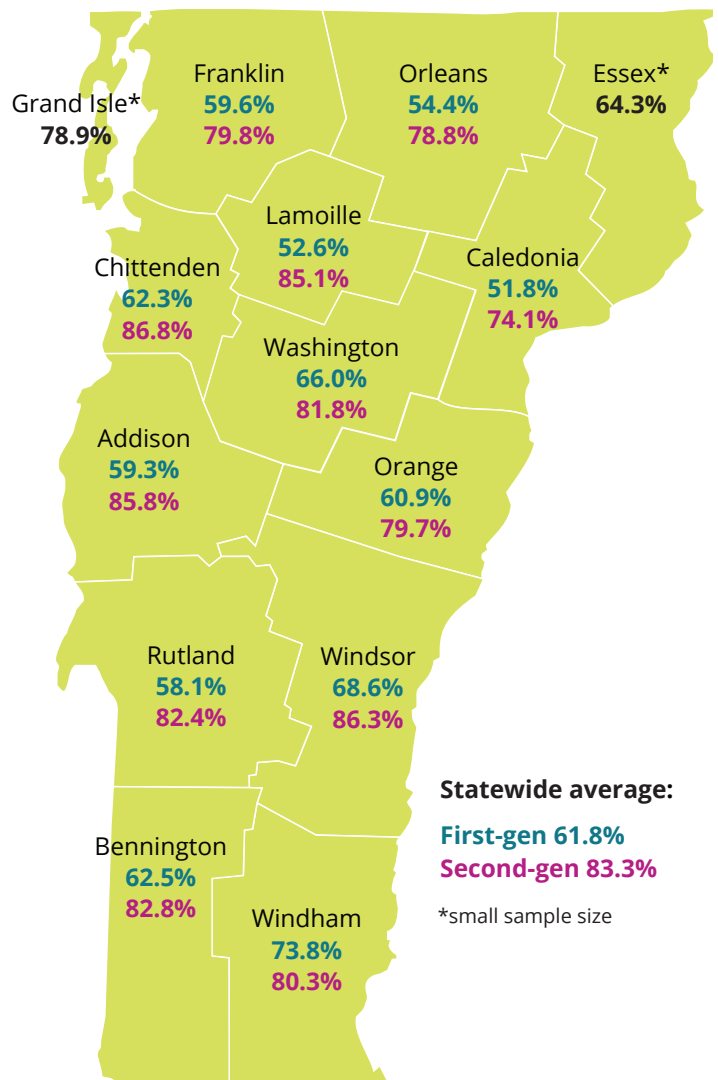
Aspiration rates differed significantly across Vermont’s fourteen counties. Chittenden County had the highest aspiration rate in 2024 (79 percent) and ranked first in 2022. The counties that saw a decline from 2024 to 2022 were Essex (a decline of five percentage points between the two survey years), followed by Windsor, Caledonia, and Orleans (each with a decline of three percentage points).

Differences in aspiration rates by parent educational attainment (see map below) at the county level also persist.

Table 1. Aspiration rate by county, Classes of 2022 & 2024

COUNTY	2022	2024
Addison	69.0%	74.6%
Bennington	73.5%	73.8%
Caledonia	67.0%	63.8%
Chittenden	78.5%	78.9%
Essex	69.6%	64.3%
Franklin	66.0%	66.1%
Grand Isle	70.6%	78.9%
Lamoille	68.8%	72.8%
Orange	64.4%	65.9%
Orleans	65.1%	62.3%
Rutland	64.3%	67.4%
Washington	67.1%	74.9%
Windham	66.0%	75.8%
Windsor	67.9 %	64.6 %
State	70.2 %	72.8 %

Figure 8. Aspiration rates of high school grads who planned to enroll at a 4-year, 2-year, or less than 2-year school



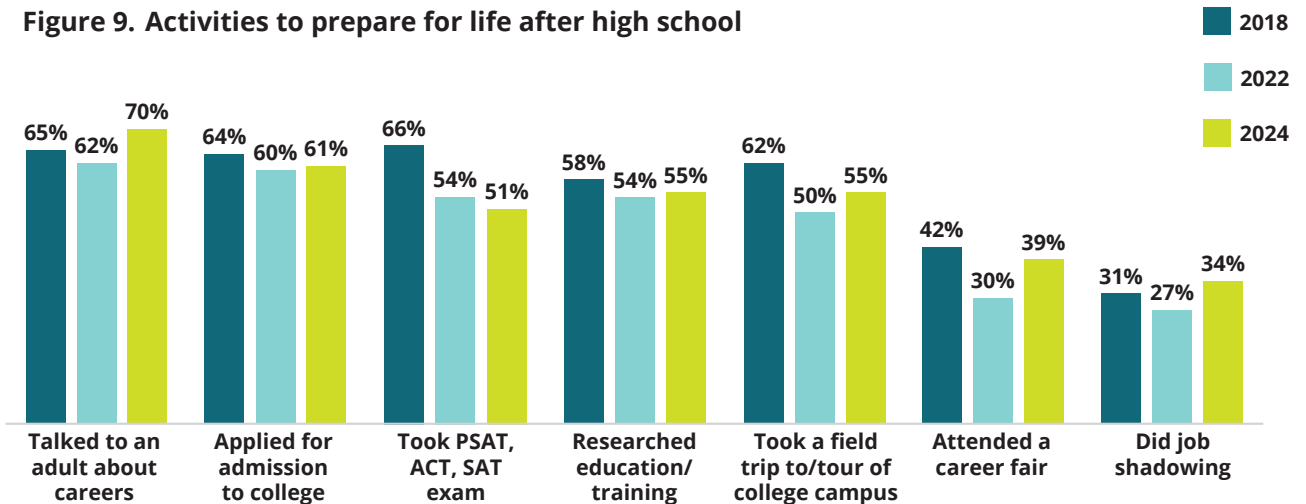
Preparing for Life after High School

Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of all seniors surveyed in 2024 reported understanding the type of additional training or education they needed to get the job they wanted after graduating from high school. The remaining seniors were either unsure of their job goals (17 percent) or unsure of the training required for the job they wanted (11 percent).

Nearly all Class of 2024 seniors (95 percent) reported speaking with their parents about what they wanted to do after high school, with most of these conversations beginning in high school (60 percent). In addition to talking with their parents, we provided a list of actions that many students could take to prepare for life after high school (see below).

Students in the Class of 2018 were more likely to report participating in activities to prepare for life after high school than in subsequent years. The decline in reported student participation in the Class of 2022 likely reflects the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on that cohort’s high school experience. It appears that seniors in the Class of 2024 show a return to participating in these types of events, though in most cases not at the 2018 rates. Notably, the decline in students taking the PSAT, ACT, or SAT occurred at the same time colleges accelerated changes to their application policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Urban Institute, 2022).

Figure 9. Activities to prepare for life after high school

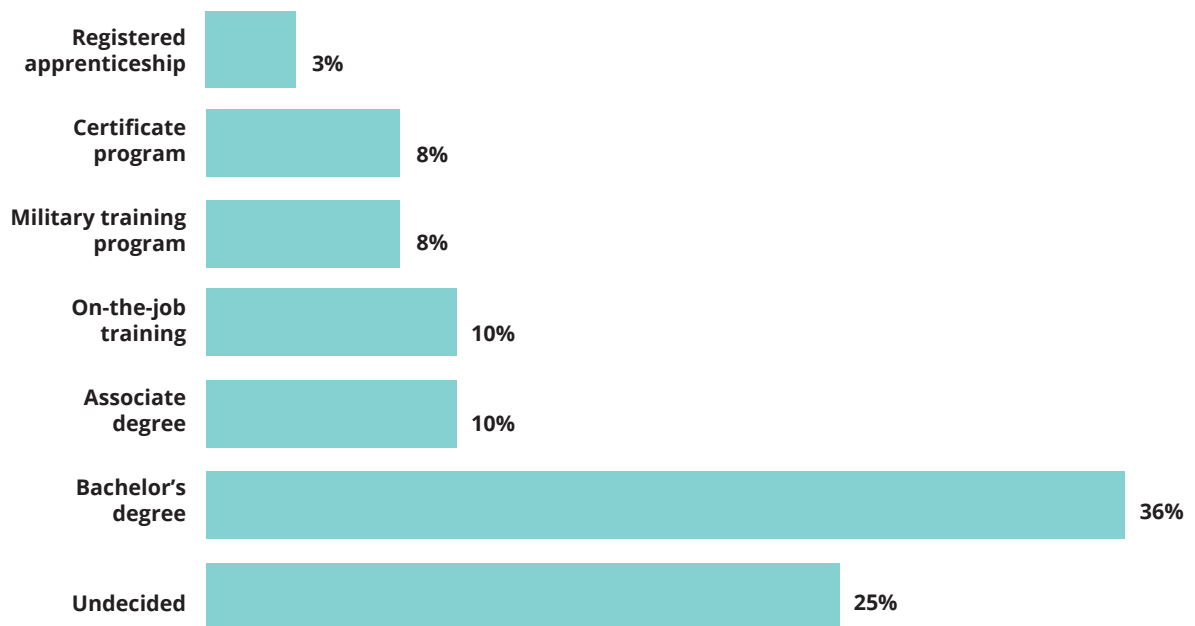


Career-Seeking Students

We define career-seeking students as those who do not plan to continue their education by the fall immediately after high school graduation. Three out of ten seniors reported they did not intend to continue their studies by the fall of 2024. However, 43 percent of career-seeking students did plan to pursue their studies or training in the future. Their intentions for how they would do that varied considerably (see below). Twenty-five percent were undecided about what kind of job training or education plans they would attempt in the future. Still, more than half thought they would pursue additional education or training, either an associate degree (10 percent) or a bachelor’s degree (36 percent), and 8 percent reported considering a certificate program.

The most important reason seniors gave for entering the workforce was to support themselves: wanting to (37 percent) or needing to (16 percent). Many career-seeking seniors (7 percent) felt they did not need to continue their education to get the job they wanted; 10 percent reported needing a break from school, and 8 percent said being unsure of their plans and goals was the most important reason for planning to enter the workforce.

Figure 10. Future education plans for seniors not planning to enroll immediately after high school



Education-Seeking Students

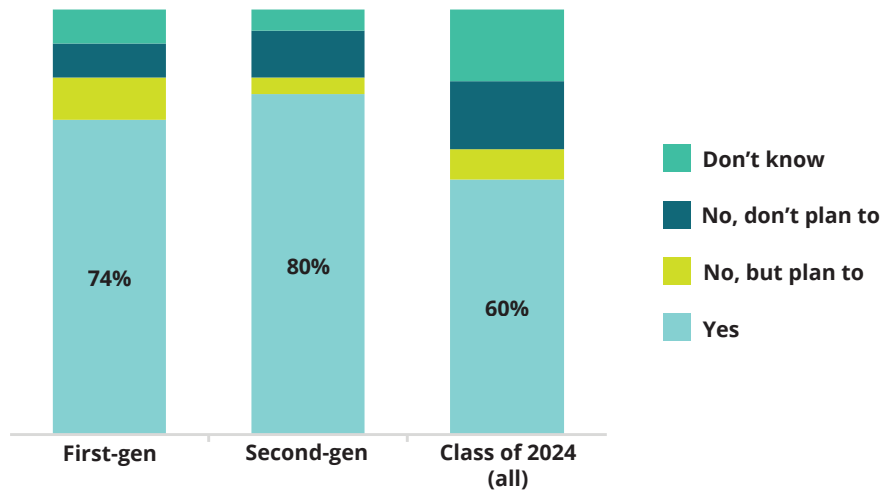
Overall, 60 percent of all seniors had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) by the time they had completed the survey. Among all seniors who planned to enroll in the fall of 2024, 77 percent reported they filed a FAFSA (not shown on the graph below). However, first-generation students planning to enroll were 6 percentage points less likely to report applying than second-generation students (see below).

Education-seeking students reported taking other steps to help pay for college, such as applying for grants and scholarships (69%) and planning to take out student loans (40 percent). First-generation students were less likely to report saving for college (47 percent) than second-generation students (67%).

Most expressed slight to moderate concern about their ability to pay for college (55 percent), but 19 percent were very to extremely concerned.

In addition, most students (87 percent) planned to work while they attended school. Half of these students planned to work 20 hours a week or more, a strategy that our previous research suggests is associated with lower postsecondary enrollment rates (VSAC, 2015). First-generation students were more likely to report planning to work more than 20 hours a week (62%) compared to second-generation students (37%).

Figure 11. Have you completed a FAFSA?



Discussion

This research brief presents data on Vermont high school seniors' postsecondary aspiration rates for the Class of 2024 with comparisons to the Classes of 2018 and 2022. Our findings suggest that the Class of 2024 aspiration rates have not fully returned to pre-COVID-19 pandemic levels.

Overall, there was a slight increase in students' intentions to pursue additional training or education after high school compared with the last class surveyed. However, the aspiration rate for the Class of 2024 was still not as high as in 2018 and prior years.

We continue to see disparities in aspiration rates by gender, parental educational attainment, and geography. The aspiration rate for first-generation males remains significantly lower than that of other groups in 2024, although it increased by 7.6 percentage points from 2022, the lowest aspiration rate ever recorded. The aspiration rate continued to decline among second-generation males, a trend observed over the last decade. Among female students, we note that aspiration rates for second-generation females have remained stable, whereas they have declined for first-generation females over time.

In contrast to 2018 and prior years, fewer students in 2022 and 2024 reported that parents wanted them to continue their postsecondary education/training immediately after high school. While there have historically been differences between gender and parental educational status, there has been a clear decline across all groups since 2018.

Taken together, it is unclear whether these findings are attributable to the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic or to other factors, such as growing concerns about affordability or changing perceptions of the benefits of higher education.

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Appendix: Data and Methodology

The data used in this report comes from the Senior Survey. Every two years, VSAC conducts a non-random survey of Vermont high school seniors attending public and private high schools.¹ Student participation was voluntary but encouraged. Schools receive reports comparing their results to the state's overall results, so most make an effort to collect the information as completely as possible.

In 2024, 3,900 of 5,492 graduating seniors (71 percent of all high school seniors) took part in the survey. Most students (96 percent) completed an online survey administered via Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT). The survey launched on a day chosen by the high school's administration and took place as early as April and as late as graduation practice (June). Students received an email with a unique link to complete the online survey; typically, up to three reminder emails were sent to students who did not complete it initially. One school chose to administer a four-page paper-and-pencil survey to students by school staff, who selected the day of the survey's administration. If students were not present on the day the paper survey was administered, no effort was made to contact them again.

Only data from students who graduated (as confirmed by the high school's administration) were included in the analysis. Data from adult graduates, GED recipients, residents of other states, and foreign exchange students who obtained a high school diploma are excluded from these analyses.

¹ VSAC did not conduct a survey in the spring of 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic.