

vsac research brief

Vermont students increasingly drawn toward higher education

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

The Vermont high school class of 2008 had a postsecondary education aspiration rate¹ of 76.3 percent — the highest rate in the nearly 30 years that the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) has collected data on the state's high school seniors. While the rate was only two-tenths of a percent higher than that of 2007, it was almost four percentage points higher than the rate 10 years ago — an encouraging sign given Vermont's efforts to convince more of its young people to aspire to college.

VSAC's survey of Vermont high school students graduating in 2008 contained other noteworthy findings:

- Aspiration rates for both males and females hit record levels (nearly 82 percent for females and 71 percent for males), with the gap between the two genders at its lowest point since 2001. The gap was highest in 1998, at 14.4 percentage points. (Figure 1) Interestingly, among class of 2008 seniors who reported their parents wanted them to continue their education, there was barely any gender gap in aspiration (93 percent for females versus 92 percent for males).



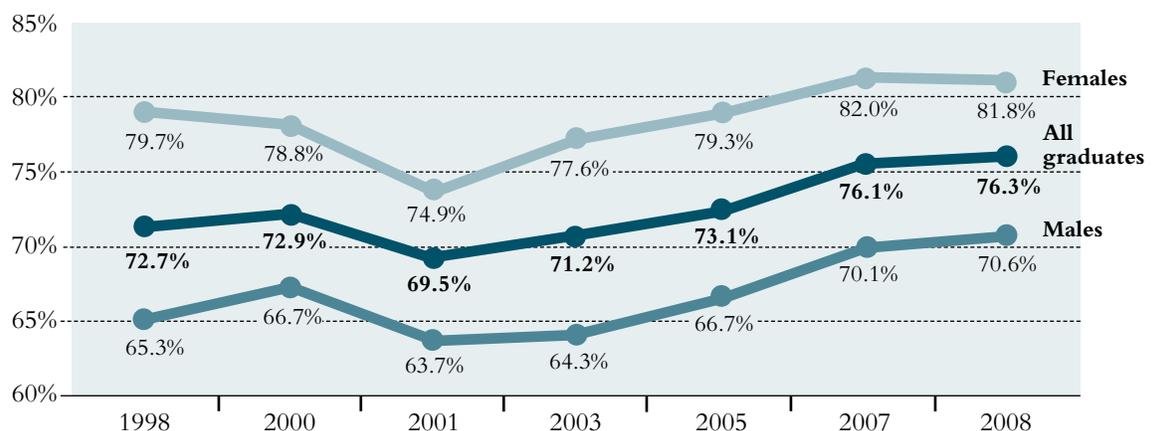
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Figure 1. Vermont postsecondary education aspiration rate
(enrollment within six months of high school graduation)



¹ The rate represents planned attendance at all types of postsecondary programs, including one-, two-, and four-year certificate or degree programs as well as non-degree courses of study, within six months of high school graduation.

- Although there continues to be a sizable gap in aspiration rate between students whose parents do not have a bachelor’s degree — referred to as “first-generation students” — and students whose parents do, both groups had record-high rates, 68 percent and 88 percent respectively. The rate for first-generation students rose eight percentage points from a low of 60 percent in 2001.
- More than half of college-bound graduating seniors still plan to attend college outside the state, but the percentage declined from prior years and hit a 10-year low. The percentage of the class of 2008 planning to attend out of state was 52.4, compared to a high of 59.6 percent for the class of 2003 and 54.5 percent for the class of 1998. (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Location of postsecondary schools students plan to attend



- The past 10 years have seen a shift toward planned attendance at four-year schools. In 2008, 61.1 percent of graduates planned to attend a four-year school, compared to 55.9 percent of graduates in 1998. Two-year schools saw a commensurate decline in planned attendance, from 13.6 percent in 1998 to 9.7 percent in 2008.
- Students in the class of 2008 who did not plan to continue education immediately after high school made that decision later in their school careers — a positive sign given earlier trends indicating that students opting out of higher education were making that decision at younger ages. Nearly 68 percent of non-continuers from the class of 2008 made their decision in junior or senior year, compared to 62.5 percent doing so in 2007. Among 2008 graduates who planned to continue education, 66.3 percent said they always knew they would pursue education beyond high school, compared to only 14.8 percent who made that decision in junior or senior year.

Every two years, VSAC conducts a statewide survey of Vermont’s high school graduating class. The class is first surveyed in the spring of senior year to identify students’ post-high school plans. The same students are then contacted a year later to reveal what they actually did following high school. The first part of the survey determines the state’s postsecondary education aspiration rate, or percentage of graduates planning to continue education immediately after high school; the second part determines the state’s postsecondary education continuation rate, or percentage of students actually enrolling right after high school. This report highlights findings from the first phase of the class of 2008 survey. More than 6,500 public and private high school seniors, representing 85 percent of Vermont’s 2008 graduating class, participated in the survey.

In addition to the findings above, the 2008 survey revealed a number of consistencies with prior surveys:

- Students’ perceptions of what their parents would like them to do continued to correlate closely with graduates’ plans following high school. Parents’ education level, students’ overall grade point average, and completion of a higher-level math class (algebra II or its equivalent) were other factors associated with graduates’ plans. (Table 1)

Table 1. Factors associated with aspiration

	Graduates’ plans	
	Continue education	Not continue education
Graduates’ impression of what their parents would like them to do		
Continue education	93.0%	7.0%
Whatever graduate desires	57.5%	42.5%
Work/military/other	24.1%	75.9%
Parents’ educational attainment		
At least a bachelor’s degree by either parent	88.0%	12.0%
No bachelor’s degree by either parent	67.9%	32.1%
Overall high school GPA		
A average	91.6%	8.4%
B average	77.7%	22.3%
C average	52.6%	47.4%
D or lower average	33.7%	66.3%
Completion of a higher-level math course		
Completed Algebra II (or its equivalent)	83.7%	16.3%
Did not complete Algebra II (or its equivalent)	44.4%	55.6%
Gender		
Female	81.8%	18.2%
Male	70.6%	29.4%

- Nearly 30 percent of continuing students cited “to get a better job” as the most important reason for pursuing education immediately after high school. Other popular responses were also career-focused: “the job I want specifically requires it” and “to make more money.”
- The top college major favored by males and females continued to differ, with males preferring engineering and females preferring health professions. However, there were some overlaps in the fields of business and visual and performing arts. Other fields favored by males were biological and biomedical sciences and computer and information sciences; other fields favored by females were education and psychology. Nearly 11 percent of males and 14 percent of females were undecided about their fields of study.

- Almost 83 percent of students who planned to continue their education immediately after high school expected to enroll within the northeast region (Vermont, elsewhere in New England, or New York).
- First-generation students with higher grade point averages had higher aspiration rates, although a smaller percentage of first-generation students maintained top grades. First-generation students who reported having an overall “A” average had an aspiration rate of 86.1 percent. Unfortunately, only 19.1 percent of first-generation students, compared to 42 percent of other students, reported receiving an “A” average.
- The majority of non-continuers planned to resume their education at a later point, with one-third of these students saying they would enroll within a year of high school graduation.
- One in five non-continuers cited “needing a break from school” as the most important reason for not continuing education or training immediately after high school. Non-continuers cited “wanting to work in order to support myself” and “needing to work in order to support myself” as the second and third most important reasons, respectively.

The full report from the Vermont high school class of 2008 senior survey is available online at www.vsac.org.