



vsac research brief

Parents' hopes trump college background in students' postsecondary decisions

Findings from VSAC survey of Vermont high school class of 2005

Overview

Biennial surveys of Vermont high school seniors conducted by the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC) consistently reveal that parents play a pivotal role in children's plans after high school. Parental influence is usually felt in two ways:

- Students whose parents have at least a four-year degree are more likely to pursue education beyond high school than students whose parents have not completed a bachelor's degree (known in the parlance as "first-generation" students).
- Students whose parents expect them to pursue education beyond high school are more likely to enroll in a postsecondary program than students whose parents want them to enter the workforce.



**Vermont Student
Assistance Corporation**
10 East Allen Street
PO Box 2000
Winooski, VT 05404
Toll-free **800-642-3177**
Burlington area **655-9602**

Visit us online at
www.vsac.org

E-mail us at
research@vsac.org

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However, VSAC's survey of the Vermont high school class of 2005 uncovered a surprising finding: Among students deemed "college-ready," parents' aspirations for their children appear to play a larger role than parents' education level in determining what their children do. In other words, when their parents are prescriptive, college-ready first-generation students have a higher college-going rate than that of peers whose parents hold a four-year degree but are not prescriptive.

The findings could hold the key to Vermont's ability to increase its college aspiration and continuation rates — an important state goal in light of an expected drop in high school population and the need to develop more educated workers. Two public policy approaches appear to be warranted:

- First, as many Vermont students as possible should be given the opportunity to become *college-ready* by enrolling in a college prep program and taking more rigorous courses in high school.
- Second, efforts should be undertaken to help more Vermont parents understand the value of *communicating* with their children at an early age (ideally, before ninth grade) about post-high school options and *becoming more prescriptive* in their expectations of their children.

The success of initiatives such as VSAC's federally funded college access programs and state-funded Start Where You Are campaign, which provide encouragement and support to both students and parents, underscores that the above public policy approaches are not only desirable but achievable.

Findings for Vermont high school class of 2005

The majority of graduates reported that their parents had a clear expectation about what they should do after high school, whether it be to continue their schooling, enter the workforce, or join the military. These students were classified as having parents whose expectations were *prescriptive*.

More than a quarter of the class's graduates reported that their parents didn't express a clear preference about their post-high school activities (parents either supported whatever decision the student might make or did not express a strong feeling about what a student should do).¹ These students were classified as having parents whose expectations were *less prescriptive*.

Students who reported their parents were prescriptive were more likely to pursue postsecondary education or training than students who reported their parents were less prescriptive (82 percent of the former versus 55 percent of the latter continued).

Even among students who were college-ready, those whose parents didn't express a clear preference were less likely to continue their studies immediately after high school than those whose parents were prescriptive (Table 1). This held true for students who:

- were enrolled in a “college prep” program
- met ACT college entrance recommendations
- had a “B” or better grade point average
- had taken either the PSAT or SAT
- had spoken to their parents before the ninth grade about their post-high school plans
- had received information before the ninth grade about careers or postsecondary education

Table 1. Class of 2005 continuation rates for students with differing intensity of parent expectations by selected college-ready factors

High school graduates who:	Parent expectations are prescriptive (% continued)	Parent expectations are less prescriptive (% continued)	Class by college-ready indicator (% continued)
Enrolled in college prep ^{***}	95	75	90
Met ACT criteria ^{***}	91	69	83
“B” or better ^{***}	87	66	80
Took PSAT ^{***}	91	68	85
Took SAT ^{***}	92	73	87
Spoke to parent(s) before 9th grade about post-high school plans ^{***}	88	64	81
Received info about careers before the 9th grade ^{***}	86	64	79
Received info about postsecondary education/training before 9th grade ^{***}	86	59	78
Overall Class of 2005^{***}	82	55	73

Chi-square ^{***} $p > .001$

Given previous VSAC survey findings, we expected to see a higher continuation rate among students whose parents had a four-year degree than among first-generation students. And we did: Overall, students who had at least one parent with a four-year degree had a continuation rate of 83 percent, compared to a rate of 65 percent for first-generation students.

However, after controlling for a variety of college-ready factors (Table 2), we discovered that parent expectations played a larger role than parent education alone. *In every case, first-generation students with prescriptive parents had higher continuation rates than students whose parents held a four-year degree but were less prescriptive.*

Conclusions

Vermont has one of the lowest birthrates in the nation, and its population of public high school graduates is expected to decline by 20 percent by 2022, the largest decrease projected among the 50 states. This dramatic demographic shift and its implications for the state's economy have led policy-makers, the business community, and higher education leaders to contemplate ways to attract and retain educated workers in the state. Among many goals is to significantly increase the postsecondary aspiration and continuation rates of recent high school graduates.

Biennial surveys of high school graduates statewide indicate that aspiration and continuation rates have risen during the last decade and that the gap between the two rates has narrowed. That is to say, more high school seniors intend to continue their studies, and more of these young adults actually enroll in some form of postsecondary education or training within six months of graduation.

Findings consistently indicate that parents' educational attainment plays a significant role in students' post-high school activities. Students who report their parents had at least a four-year degree are more likely to enroll than students who report neither of their parents completed a bachelor's degree. Also, parents' desires play an important role. Students who report their parents expected them to pursue postsecondary education or training are more likely to enroll than students who report their parents wanted them to pursue other activities (such as enter the workforce or join the military).

This report examined students' perceptions of their parents' expectations in a different way. Specifically, we examined the prescriptive nature of parents' expectations — whether students reported their parents wanted them to pursue a specific course of action (go to college, enter the workforce, join the military) or, alternatively, whether they perceived their parents' expectations as being less prescriptive (they had no strong feeling). Findings suggest that the perception of a prescriptive parent expectation has a significant impact on post-high school activities, even when controlling for a variety of college preparatory milestones or parents' educational attainment.

Table 2. Class of 2005 continuation rates for students with differing parent expectations and parent educational attainment by selected college-ready factors

High school graduates who:	Parent expectations are prescriptive (% continued)	Parent expectations are less prescriptive (% continued)	Class by college-ready factor & generational status (% continued)
Enrolled in college prep			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	89	76	88
Parent with 4-yr degree	94	70	92
Met ACT criteria			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	83	64	81
Parent with 4-yr degree	93	67	89
“B” or better			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	76	61	74
Parent with 4-yr degree	89	69	87
Took PSAT			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	83	67	81
Parent with 4-yr degree	92	70	88
Took SAT			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	85	72	84
Parent with 4-yr degree	92	69	89
Spoke to parent(s) about post-high school plans before 9th grade			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	75	58	73
Parent with 4-yr degree	88	64	87
Received info about careers before the 9th grade			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	74	58	73
Parent with 4-yr degree	88	64	85
Received info about PSE or training before the 9th grade			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	72	54	72
Parent with 4-yr degree	90	60	85
Class of 2005 by generational status			
Parent with no 4-yr degree	74	50	65
Parent with 4-yr degree	90	64	83

¹ High school graduates who participated in the 2005 Senior Survey were asked to select the statement that best matched what their parent(s) wanted them to do after graduating high school. The response options were: (1) Attend a 4-year college, (2) Attend a 2-year college, (3) Attend a 2-year college and then transfer to another institution, (4) Attend a postgraduate program at a prep school, (5) Attend a vocational, technical, business, or trade school of less than two years, (6) Become a full-time homemaker, (7) Get a full-time job, (8) Participate in a registered apprenticeship, (9) Join the military, (10) They have no strong feelings, (11) They want me to do what I want to do. Students were classified as having parents who were prescriptive, in that the parents expressed clear expectations, if the students selected any response from 1 to 9. Students who selected responses 10 or 11 were classified as having parents who were less prescriptive, in that the parents' expectations were less clear.