



Ask and You Shall Perceive

Vermont and New Hampshire Ask High School Seniors: “What Next?”

INGRID LEMAIRE AND WANDA ARCE

Who are New England’s future college students? What is the shape of the region’s future educated workforce? The answers to these questions may be found in part in the region’s high schools where each year, 150,000 or so graduating seniors decide whether and where to go to college. It’s a group most states don’t consult often enough as they forge higher education policies. But Vermont has been doing so for a quarter-century, and New Hampshire is now following suit.

In the spring of 2002, a K-12 and higher education collaborative called the New Hampshire Partnership for the Advancement of Postsecondary Education Research, or NH PAPER, piloted a survey modeled after Vermont’s, asking seniors at 21 New Hampshire high schools about their postsecondary education and career plans and their perceptions of the education they received in high school. Last year, with support from the New Hampshire Higher Education Assistance Foundation, the Measuring Aspirations and Participation survey was administered statewide to 8,100 graduating seniors at 56 public high schools and eight private high schools.

The New Hampshire initiative offers a unique opportunity for students to provide feedback on their high school experience and for administrators to gather important trend information and useful data for planning, revising and upgrading curriculum. Some schools have used the findings to make curricular and guidance adjustments necessary to meet the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

The survey provides the higher education community with valuable insights about student preparation and plans for higher education. It also promotes understanding of the “pipeline” to New Hampshire higher education and, to the extent that students who go to college in their home state are more likely to work in that state upon graduation, a glimpse of the state’s future educated workforce.

Following are some key findings from the class of 2004 survey:

- A large majority of New Hampshire high school seniors—81 percent of seniors at public schools and 96 percent at private schools—planned to enroll in college in the fall of 2004.
- Those seniors who planned to continue their education decided to do so at a very early age; 21 percent of public high school seniors and 31 percent of private high school seniors said they had “always” known they would attend college. An additional 38 percent of public and 46 percent of private high school seniors said they had decided by sixth grade.
- Parents have a very strong influence on their children’s educational plans. Nearly nine of 10 public high school seniors who planned to attend a four-year college said their parents wanted them to. Nearly seven in 10 of those who planned instead to get a full-time job also reported that their parents encouraged them to do so.
- Young women are more likely to plan to continue their education than their male peers. Sixty-seven percent of female graduates in the class of 2004 planned to continue their education at four-year colleges, compared with 55 percent of young males.
- Among seniors not planning to go to college in fall 2004, there was a slight increase in the proportion planning on joining the military—from 14 percent in 2003 to 17 percent in 2004. Broken down by gender, the data show that 20 percent of non-college-bound men and 9 percent of non-college-bound women planned to join the military.

In analyzing 2004 survey results, NH PAPER also placed certain findings on a “watch list”:

- More than half of college-bound public high school seniors and 70 percent of the state’s private high school seniors planned to enroll in colleges outside New Hampshire.
- College-bound public high school seniors who planned to enroll outside New Hampshire increasingly cite financial reasons for deciding against a New Hampshire institution. Between 2002 and 2004, the percentage of public high school seniors who cited expenses as a reason not to attend public and private four-year campuses in New Hampshire more than doubled from 3 percent to 7 percent, while the percentage who cited this reason for not choosing a community or technical college in New Hampshire rose from 2 percent to 6 percent. In each case, the percentage citing lack of financial aid also increased.

- More than half of the seniors—53 percent at public schools and 67 percent at privates—planned to live somewhere other than New Hampshire after completing their education.

A six-state assessment of high school seniors' preferences could help educators, business leaders and policymakers better understand the region's future.

New Hampshire has not conducted a follow-up survey with graduates to learn whether they followed through on their plans to pursue postsecondary education. But we know from national data that aspirations are higher than participation—that is, more high school seniors report that they plan on going to college than actually attend. NH PAPER is exploring various ways to compare survey results with national data, such as the “Successful Outcomes Program” available through the National Student Clearinghouse. This program, currently being piloted at 11 New Hampshire high schools, will provide previously unavailable longitudinal data on the actual college attendance and persistence patterns of high school graduates. Successful Outcomes will generate reports for the high schools, indicating where students enroll in college, whether they attend full-time

or part-time, and, once they graduate, the date and degree they earn.

The Vermont Student Assistance Corp. (VSAC), in contrast, surveys Vermont high school seniors on their post-high school plans during their senior year and then again one year later. Vermont's results are based on a statewide survey representing all public and most private high schools.

VSAC's most recent survey revealed that 71 percent of the class of 2003 (the most recent year for which data on Vermont seniors are available) planned to pursue postsecondary education. One year later, about 68 percent reported that they had actually enrolled at a postsecondary institution. The gap between aspirations and participation is the narrowest it has been in Vermont since 1994. Fully 95 percent of those students attended college on a full-time basis and 87 percent were at four-year institutions. Enrollment at public and private institutions was split about evenly. The majority of those Vermont college freshmen—59 percent—were enrolled in colleges outside Vermont, but nearly half of those who enrolled out-of-state attended New England institutions.

More than 64 percent of Vermont graduates who did not pursue education in the fall of 2003 reported that they planned to continue their education at some point in the future. Many of these young people said they would need to continue their education to get the job they wanted.

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Vermont's next biennial survey will take place in 2005, allowing for the first time a meaningful examination of differences and similarities in the career and educational preferences of students hailing from the two neighboring states on either side of the Connecticut River.

To the extent that New England's higher education and labor supply operate in a single regional market, a regionwide, six-state assessment of high school seniors' preferences—with a follow-up to see how participation matches aspirations—could go a long way in helping New England educators, business leaders and policymakers better understand the region's future.

Ingrid Lemaire is vice president for research and government relations at Granite State Management & Resources, a NHHEAF Network Organization. Wanda Arce is director of research at the Vermont Student Assistance Corp.