



Portability: Education Opportunity for All Vermonters

What is the Portability Issue?

“Portability” of the Vermont grants to financially needy students is a longstanding policy allowing Vermont students to use their grant to attend the school or program that they determine best meets their needs.

Origins of Grant Portability

Portability has been a statutory grant policy since 1965 when Governor Phil Hoff and the General Assembly established the grant program and created VSAC to administer it. It was born out of a principle of social justice, and a commitment to reducing inequality. It is based on the fundamental premise that all students deserve equal access to their postsecondary school choices, and should be able to choose the institution that best meets their needs, regardless of geographic location.

Policy Goals of Portability

When we talk about limiting or eliminating portability, we should keep the state’s original intent in mind and stay focused on the students whom the grants are designed to help. Do Vermonters want to restrict the choices of needy students, or do we want to continue to use portability as one way to “level the playing field” for students of different economic means? As VSAC marks its 50th anniversary, we believe that the historical policy is more important than ever, and should be retained and embraced. The link below to “frequent questions” gives the compelling reasons for this.

Practical Considerations

There are also practical considerations to take into account. Vermont is a small state that has many fine institutions of higher education. These institutions are not able to provide the full range of majors, degrees or programs of studies that are required to be successful in a 21st century economy. This year, for example, using data from the Vermont public institutions the New England Board of Higher Education added 19 new programs to the list of over 160 baccalaureate programs that are not available through those public institutions.

Why Portability is Critical to Lower and Lower-Middle Income Families

The reasons students and their families choose to attend out-of-state schools are frequently misunderstood. For students working and/or supporting families, particularly in southern Vermont and along parts of our eastern and western borders (and who need to commute to classes), an out-of-state institution that offers their course of study is significantly closer and thus more affordable than in-state alternatives. For some students, the out-of-state school offering their course of study has significantly higher graduation rates than their in-state alternatives.

Some students make their choices based on cost; others make their choice based on program quality. Some students make choices because of co-op opportunities available through that institution, while others seek to experience diversity of cultures and experiences that are more readily available in other regions of the country. And as can be seen in the attached testimonials, some students seek, for personal reasons, to leave the state to remove themselves from difficult and sometimes dangerous situations. Critics of portability would like to eliminate these options for lower-middle and lower-income students.

How Does Grant Usage Vary by County?

Attached is a map showing the number, percentage and dollar amount of grants used in state and out of state. The northwestern parts of the state tend to show lower use of portability, and the southern areas show great use, reflecting historical trends and the greater accessibility of schools in nearby border states.

What the Data Show

Every two years, VSAC surveys all Vermont high school seniors to determine their plans following high school. A year later, a follow-up study determines whether they actually followed through with their plans. In recent years, our surveys have shown that at least half of all college-bound seniors are choosing to study outside Vermont. This percentage remained steady over the years. When we look just at grant recipients, we find that only about 30 percent leave the state to attend college. This percentage has been declining since 2007. What this indicates is that, even with portability, lower-income students continue to have fewer options than their peers with more resources. Brain drain, if it is indeed a problem, is not caused by portability.

Migration works both ways

While Vermont is second nationally in the percentage of students it exports to other states, it also is second in the percentage it imports. While some Vermont students who leave the state don't return, at least initially, many non-Vermonters who attend college here stay after graduation. U.S. Census Bureau data show that, overall, Vermont has been gaining, not losing, college-educated individuals. We know that at least 40 percent of these students return to Vermont after graduation.

A Small Slice of the Pie

Vermont currently allocates around 75 percent of its funding directly to UVM and to the VSC and only 25 percent directly to students in the form of grants. About 24 percent of the grant appropriation, or \$4.7 million, was used by students attending out-of-state schools in FY14. The vast majority of these funds were used to attend schools that border Vermont. This represented 4.9 percent of the state's total budget for higher education.

If we prevented students from using their grants in these states, as some have suggested, we would free up only a small slice of the higher education pie and then in many cases would have to spend far more to educate these students in Vermont. We would also deprive these students of access to programs that they've determined best meet their needs.

How do Out-of-State Schools Treat the Vermont Grant?

A 2014 VSAC survey of the financial aid offices at the top 20 schools that grant recipients attend out of state revealed that 18 of these institutions used VSAC grant and scholarship aid to reduce unmet need or student loan debt rather than reduce their own institutional aid. The average grant for students leaving the state in FY14 was \$1,206, less than the average in-state grant and considerably less than the cost to subsidize tuition for a student attending a Vermont public college.

These grants enable the students to leverage substantial student financial aid by attending out-of-state institutions. VSAC has calculated that grant recipients who left the state in FY14 were awarded \$51.1 million in financial aid, with more than 93 percent of that coming from non-loan sources – financial aid that students do not need to repay. Portability has enabled Vermont to export some of its need, assist students in reducing loan debt and to provide educational opportunities that are beyond our financial means.

Unintended Consequences?

What is the overall economic benefit of Vermont's ability to export need and attract a high proportion of non-Vermonters? If more Vermont students stay in state, will there be less capacity for out-of-state students? How would that affect Vermont's economy?

Clearly, the state of Vermont has underfunded higher education and needs to invest more in both its public institutions and the student grant program if our students are to be adequately educated and Vermont's economy is to thrive. However, eliminating or restricting portability is not going to provide a quick fix to our funding problems. Rather, it could end up digging us deeper in the hole at the same time it shortchanges Vermont students.

Grant Recipients Tell Their Portability Stories

Just as important are the great, positive differences that portability brings to individual Vermonters. Let us introduce you to some students who have been helped by portability.

Meet Greg

“The grant was very valuable to me; it allowed me to attend school without incurring as much debt.

“I chose UMASS because it had a good online-based program that met my needs and was close enough geographically that I could attend in person if need be. I find it disappointing that Vermont has no affordable schools south of Rutland. I think the biggest drawback to colleges in Vermont is the northern bias. We simply have no affordable 4-year colleges in southern Vermont. UMASS was much closer than any in-state choices.

“I found the people at UMASS to be very, very helpful and willing to work with me to finish my degree in a program that could incorporate my life experience into my degree plan.”

Meet “A”

“I chose to go to an out-of-state school because at the time, they had a nursing program, and I was put on a wait list for VTC nursing school. Also, they are much more inexpensive than say UVM or Norwich for nursing.

“The state grant I received is very valuable to me! Because the school I attend is so inexpensive, I have to take out hardly any loans at all, and being a single parent, the less debt I can get into for school, the better. So this grant is wonderful; it paid for almost two classes for me.

“I chose to go out of state as opposed to in state because I found a less expensive nursing program. The travel is overwhelming at times, but I have gotten used to the commute and I love my school. They really care about the students and are extremely supportive! I would still have to commute about 70 miles to attend UVM or Norwich, and I would be paying a considerable amount more.

“I absolutely think I am having an experience I would not have had in Vermont. I’m receiving an excellent education at WMCC in Littleton, NH in the medical assistant program. The staff is incredibly understanding and supportive of non-traditional students. I attended CCV and although I had good experiences, WMCC has been an answer to prayers.”

Meet Mark Wright

(Mark Wright teaches HVAC at Green Mountain Technology & Career Center.)

“My conundrum is mainly with the Vermont education system, for not having any HVAC (heating, ventilation and air conditioning) training in Vermont, with the exception of our GMTCC HVAC high school program. Currently anyone who wants a degree in my field has to leave the state to find appropriate schools and programs of study.

“The portability of VSAC help is important for my students, who have no other choice but to leave Vermont for schooling. (VSAC scholarships would also be welcomed and put to use, and very much appreciated.)

Meet Ryan

“I chose to go to an out-of-state school because I wanted to experience people and places outside of Vermont – a place I loved, but also the only place I'd really ever spent any time. I also wanted to be far enough from home that I couldn't rely on my mom and dad for everything.

“In terms of the school, Ithaca College, it seemed like it was the right size for me (~5,000 at the time), it had a major I was interested in (Exercise Science) and it allowed for the possibility of playing sports (I ended up doing indoor and outdoor track and field for a year).

“As a first-generation college student, all I can remember is that I had to agree to a lot of various financial commitments. I know this perhaps sounds irresponsible, but with the pace and changes that were occurring during that time, as well as the immediacy of them compared to long-term financial obligations, it was easy to move forward somewhat blindly.

“I do think that I was able to experience a place, and people, that I would not have been able to in Vermont. Simply having to plan for, navigate and actually drive the 5+ hours each way every time I wanted to come home was experiential. I believe that I met a greater number of other students from states outside of Vermont than I would have had I stayed. I learned how to advocate for myself without the help of personal or family connections. I was able to experience a liberal arts education at a small, private college.

“I currently teach middle school science in central Vermont. After Ithaca (B.S. in Exercise Science + Health minor), I completed Johnson State's External Degree program (B.S. in Biology), UVM's Master's Program in Curriculum and Instruction (M.Ed.) and I am currently working to complete my dissertation at UVM (Ed.D.)”

Meet Justin

“I've grown up in Vermont for basically my entire life. My home life was terrible beyond imagination and I essentially was homeless for all of my teen years. I worked over time consistently and lived from couch to couch.

“I've always wanted to attend college and Clark Amadon (a VSAC outreach counselor) was the only reason I was able to attend. The state grant isn't much in comparison to the overall costs of attending a university, but that doesn't mean that it didn't help. Without the state grant my only other option would have been to take out parent loans which would have stopped me from going to college all together.

Meet “T”

“I chose to go to an out-of-state college because it fit my personal needs the best. I wanted to take online college courses because I have a very busy life trying to manage school, work and my daughter. The online program offered at SNHU that I chose is flexible, and it fit my schedule and budget. SNHU also maintains a long *tradition of academic excellence* as well.

“The state grant I received was very valuable to me! With the aid of my state grant, VSAC, and federal grants, I am able to take very little direct subsidized loans out to pay for my education. I am able to achieve my dreams of becoming the first person in my family to graduate college with a B.S. in criminal justice. I already graduated with my associate’s degree in criminal justice this past summer from the Community College of Vermont (CCV). I never could have afforded college without the help of state and federal grants. I feel truly blessed to have been given this remarkable opportunity in my life!

“I realize there are many amazing colleges in Vermont and I did have to narrow my options down. I did my research, but ultimately decided on SNHU because of their affordable prices, great reputation and online degree program. Some of the other great colleges in Vermont that I was considering attending were: Burlington College, Johnson State College, and Champlain College. It is the big choices in life that set the direction for where we are going, but it is also the little choices that help to get us there. I hope this information has been most beneficial in maintaining the ability of Vermont students to use VSAC grants for out-of-state colleges.”

Meet Nick.

Nick graduated from Mill River Union High School and obtained his Bachelor’s degree from Chestnut Hill and his Master’s degree from Drexel University.

“The very thought that Vermont is discussing taking money away from students to go to college out of state – this is valuable VSAC Grant money that students who would like to broaden their horizon.

“How valuable is the grant? Just because a Vermont resident goes out of state to go to school, does not make them any "LESS" of a Vermont resident and should be entitled the full benefits. To me coming from a low-income family, well below the poverty line, the grant was very valuable.

“Why should a VSAC student be made to stay in state? Judging by what I hear on the radio and news, the state of Vermont is in economic turmoil, so things from when I was a teenager have not changed much. Therefore, let the student have the right to look elsewhere to learn, then if they come back to the state they can express new ideas that worked elsewhere.

“What factors helped my decision to go out of state?”

- 1) In state schools did not present me with much financial aid (go figure).
- 2) At the time my declared major was not available.
- 3) The probability of being employed with a career position that would allow for successful payments on student loans, as well as living, was and is still not very high. From my current perspective, this is still true, I have my Master’s degree and I still cannot afford the cost of living in VT on top of my Loan payments, because VT does not pay the net worth of someone's degree.
- 4) Lack of co-op opportunities.

The fact of the matter was that VT didn't and still lacks the incentives for students to want to study in VT. When I was applying for schools, I was offered larger financial packages in PA than any school in NH, VT, or MA. This was the major deciding factor.”

Meet Olivia

“I chose to go out of state for multiple reasons. These included the school itself, the fact that it was excellent in the program I wanted and I love the state of Maine in general.

“The state grant was incredibly important for me. If it weren't for the grant, it would've been hard to make ends meet and find another way to pay for school.

“I chose a double major of criminal justice and psychology. I looked into a few in state schools to see if they had the program that I wanted, but most only had one of the two and if it had both there was no overlap in the two programs.

Meet Ged

Ged is a senior at Wentworth Institute of Technology, currently completing his second co-op. He is studying mechanical engineering. He is the youngest in his family and his sister was a Green & Gold Scholar and went to UVM. Another brother also chose an out-of-state school.

“I chose to go to an out-of-state college because, as great as Vermont is, I wanted to go somewhere that I felt gave me the largest amount of opportunities, whether they be school, work or just personal ones. ... I wanted to experience life in a new place and get out of my comfort zone.

“My school has mandatory co-op semesters, which makes it sure I get in almost a year's worth of real work experience when I graduate. That was a major factor in choosing to go to Wentworth.

“The Vermont State Grant was extremely valuable to me. It helped fund my schooling so that I could further my education and pursue something that I was passionate about. Having the support from VSAC and the Vermont State Grant to be able to choose the school I wanted is something that is extremely valuable. “

Meet Natalie

“I chose to go out of state because that was my only option for the dental program at the time and NHTI had an amazing program that was close to home. The grant was extremely valuable to me and gave me the opportunity to go to school; I was able to use the grant at NHTI with it being a sister state. I was so very fortunate to receive that grant.

“If I would have gotten into the program I chose in Burlington, the wait time would have been a year and I wouldn't have had the college experience. NHTI was an excellent school with an amazing turnaround on jobs once graduated. That is one of the reasons I chose this school, I had a job before I even graduated.”

Meet Anako

Anako is a former refugee from Congo and an ELL student. She's a single parent who is still working part-time while attending North Country Community College in Ticonderoga, NY.

“I chose an out-of-state school because I was given the opportunity to attend the school. It's cheaper than in-state school. I have been on the waiting list from VTC and six of my credits

already expired, so I have to act now before I lose everything. The state grant was very valuable to me; it didn't cover all of my expenses but I don't know what I would do without the state grant, so I am very thankful."

Meet James

"I chose a school that had the best program for me; it happened to be out of state. Very few Vermont colleges offered film studies as a major and of these colleges none offered a comparable hands-on film production program as the college I am attending.

"The Vermont State Grant was very valuable to me and helped make my ability to attend college possible.

Meet Ashley

"I chose to go out of state because I wanted to leave Vermont for the first time in my life. The school I chose, Keene State, is the perfect distance away. The state grant is extremely valuable to me. Without it, I will not be able to afford my education.

"I am a Psychology and Criminal Justice double major at Keene State. Yes, there are in-state schools that offer both of these majors but I really feel as though I am getting the best education at Keene. All of my professors are amazing and the programs are incredible.

"I wanted to go out of state because it is something I have never done before. I wanted that new experience of being in a different state and a new place. I think being out of state has made me more independent. When I first went to Keene I was totally unfamiliar with the area and I had to learn my way around on my own in a new place without the help of my parents or my friends. I like being a couple of hours away from home as I think it has helped me grow as a person. Keene feels like home to me."

More information

For more information, please see the documents VSAC presented to the committee and are posted to the PreK-16 Council website where much of the background and data on the Vermont Grant Program can be found:

[Graduation Rates and Retention - VSAC](#)

[Student Loan Debt - VSAC](#)

[What is Portability?](#)

[Facts about the Vermont Grant Program](#)

[Frequent Questions--Grants](#)