

1 H.297

2 Introduced by Representatives Priestley of Bradford, Branagan of Georgia,  
3 Burke of Brattleboro, Chapin of East Montpelier, Headrick of  
4 Burlington, Howard of Rutland City, Marcotte of Coventry,  
5 McCann of Montpelier, McGill of Bridport, Mrowicki of  
6 Putney, Satcowitz of Randolph, Sweeney of Shelburne, and  
7 White of Waitsfield

8 Referred to Committee on

9 Date:

10 Subject: Education; Community College of Vermont; scholarship

11 Statement of purpose of bill as introduced: This bill proposes to create the  
12 Free Degree Promise Grant Program to provide funding toward a free  
13 associate's degree through the Community College of Vermont (CCV) for  
14 eligible individuals.

15 An act relating to the creation of the Free Degree Promise Grant Program  
16 for the Community College of Vermont

17 It is hereby enacted by the General Assembly of the State of Vermont:

18 Sec. 1. FINDINGS

19 The General Assembly finds that:

1           (1) According to the New England Secondary School Consortium,  
2           Vermont’s high school graduates continue on to college at the lowest rates in  
3           New England at 45 percent, with students with low income, Black students,  
4           students with disabilities, and male students facing the deepest equity gaps in  
5           continuation rates.

6           (2) Rapidly declining college aspirations among youth since 2020, as  
7           revealed by survey data from the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation  
8           (VSAC), signal that continuation rates will sink lower.

9           (3) College degrees, especially associate’s degrees, have enduring value.  
10          Associate’s degree graduates in Vermont are the most likely in the country to  
11          achieve a positive return on investment at 79 percent, according to Strada  
12          Education Foundation.

13          (4) Free accelerated associate’s degree pathways are a high-leverage  
14          opportunity to improve Vermont’s college continuation rates among students  
15          furthest from opportunity.

16          (5) Vermont’s enabling conditions to improve college attainment  
17          through accelerated associate’s degree pathways are strong due to the  
18          following factors:

19                (A) Vermont has a single, statewide community college. The  
20                Community College of Vermont (CCV) serves the greatest number of  
21                Vermonters and of Vermonters with low income of any college in the State via

1 12 locations and extensive learning options. Over 25 percent of CCV students  
2 are high school students.

3 (B) With the enactment of 2013 Acts and Resolves No. 77,  
4 Vermont's flexible pathways bill, Vermont has a 10-plus year history of  
5 offering flexible pathways to graduation that include a free year of full-time  
6 college in lieu of a traditional 12th grade year. Historically, most participating  
7 students enroll at CCV.

8 (i) Act 77 was established to develop and expand high-quality  
9 secondary education experiences, to promote opportunities for postsecondary  
10 readiness, and to increase high school completion and postsecondary  
11 continuation. Act 77 offers Vermont students two free dual enrollment courses  
12 plus the opportunity to enroll in Early College their senior year.

13 (ii) Early College in Vermont allows seniors to complete their last  
14 year of high school and their first year of college at the same time, earning free  
15 college credits that also count toward graduation from high school.

16 (C) Vermont has established cross-sector partnerships. The cross-  
17 sector Early College Equity Working Group has spent several years analyzing  
18 data, building a shared vision, exploring promising practices, and addressing  
19 barriers. In 2004, a cross-sector team from Vermont was invited to participate  
20 in the national Accelerate ED community to build on this work.

1           (D) Recent public investments in college affordability. Facing a  
2           shrinking workforce and an economy with two job openings for every  
3           jobseeker, policymakers have committed to investing in talent, particularly  
4           through CCV and with the 802 Opportunity Grant.

5           (E) Since 2022, the McClure Foundation’s Free Degree Promise has  
6           built on Vermont’s Early College program at CCV to create a free, fast-tracked  
7           associate’s degree pathway available to all Vermont youth in the high school  
8           classes of 2023–2026.

9           (F) Two and a half years since its launch, emerging data shows the  
10          Free Degree Promise is working to equitably scale accelerated degrees for  
11          Vermont youth. Since the Promise was announced in spring 2022, CCV has  
12          seen a 150 percent increase in enrollment of students with low income in the  
13          State’s Early College program at CCV and triple the number of CCV’s Early  
14          College program completers persisting near-full-time at CCV toward a degree.  
15          Over half of the 2024–2025 Free Degree Promise student cohort are first-  
16          generation college students.

17          (G) CCV majors closely align with Vermont’s identified workforce  
18          needs.

1 Sec. 2. 16 V.S.A. § 2189 is added to read:

2 § 2189. FREE DEGREE PROMISE GRANT PROGRAM

3 (a) Program creation. There is created the Free Degree Promise Grant  
4 Program to provide funding toward a free associate's degree through the  
5 Community College of Vermont (CCV) for eligible individuals.

6 (b) Eligibility. CCV shall be responsible for verifying Program eligibility.  
7 To be eligible for the Program, an individual shall satisfy each of the following  
8 requirements:

9 (1) be enrolled at CCV on a full-time basis, which shall be a minimum  
10 of 12 credits, in an approved undergraduate program of study leading to an  
11 associate's degree;

12 (2) have successfully completed the State's Early College program,  
13 established under section 946 of this title, at CCV, with a minimum of 20  
14 successful credits in the academic year prior to receipt of the individual's first  
15 award under this Program;

16 (3) have not earned a prior associate's degree or the equivalent;

17 (4) have completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid or an  
18 equivalent application for State-funded assistance;

19 (5) is not in default on any federal or state student loans for attendance  
20 at any institution, or owe a refund for any previous state financial aid program;  
21 and

1           (6) meet satisfactory academic progress according to CCV's  
2           requirements.

3           (c) Program benefit.

4           (1) Free Degree Promise grants shall cover, after all other sources of  
5           federal and State grant aid have been exhausted:

6                   (A) any remaining tuition and fees due to CCV; and

7                   (B) a stipend, per enrolled semester, for the cost of books, supplies,  
8           and other expenses in the amount of:

9                           (i) \$1,000.00 for students whose household income is less than  
10           400 percent of the federal poverty level per year; or

11                           (ii) \$500.00 for students whose household income is equal to or  
12           greater than 400 percent of the federal poverty level per year.

13           (2) Eligible individuals may be awarded Free Degree Promise grants  
14           and supports for a maximum of five semesters of full-time study, which shall  
15           be a minimum of 12 enrolled credits per academic term, or until the individual  
16           completes a degree program, whichever comes first.

17           (d) Disbursement of funds. CCV shall determine an individual's eligibility  
18           for the Program at the time of enrollment. Program funds shall be disbursed to  
19           eligible individuals in the academic year in which funds are appropriated by  
20           the General Assembly until funds are exhausted. Any funds remaining at the

1 end of a fiscal year shall carry forward and shall be available to CCV in the  
2 following fiscal year to award Program funds as set forth in this section.

3 (e) Administration, promotion, and evaluation. CCV shall adopt policies,  
4 procedures, and guidelines necessary for implementation of the Program. Not  
5 more than 12 percent of funds appropriated by the General Assembly for the  
6 Program shall be used by CCV for student support services and the  
7 administration and evaluation of the Program.

8 (f) Report. Annually on or before January 15, CCV shall report to the  
9 General Assembly regarding implementation and administration of the  
10 Program, including data regarding annual student enrollment in the Program,  
11 dollar amounts spent and unspent, semester and degree completion  
12 disaggregated by priority equity populations, and any recommendations for  
13 legislative action regarding the Program. The provisions of 2 V.S.A. § 20(d)  
14 (expiration of required reports) shall not apply to the required report to be  
15 made under this subsection.

16 Sec. 3. EFFECTIVE DATE

17 This act shall take effect on July 1, 2025.