

Vermont's Free Degree Promise

THE J. WARREN  LOIS MCCLURE FOUNDATION

Promoting access to postsecondary and career education for Vermonters

Free accelerated associate degree pathways are a **high-leverage opportunity to improve Vermont's college continuation rates** among students furthest from opportunity.



Programs like these enable Vermonters to reach their full potential by supporting them in taking an important step towards advancing their education and embracing lifelong careers in fields like healthcare.

This opportunity is a game changer for first-generation students and for employers alike.”

– Anna Noonan President & CEO, Central Vermont Medical Center



VT's Free Degree Promise

an accelerated pathway to a free degree

VT's Free Degree Promise offers all students in the Vermont high school classes of 2023-2026 the opportunity to earn a free associate degree through the state's Early College program at CCV by covering up to five additional semesters for Early College completers. The Promise covers tuition and fees after federal and state financial aid and also offers living stipends and enhanced academic and career advising.

Free Degree Promise students are graduating at twice the rate and in half the time as community college students nationally.

Free Degree Promise:

Pathway components and supports



12 associate degrees aligned with labor market needs

All CCV degrees and introductory courses have career exploration as an essential learning objective. Many degree programs embed one or more of CCV's 24 career-focused certificate programs like Bookkeeping, Clinical Medical Assisting, and Cybersecurity.



Career learning supports aligned with Guided Pathways

Degree programs include advising on course sequencing and pathways to in-demand careers in addition to career exploration, professional field experience, and other work-based learning. Business partnerships offer direct pathways to employment in fast-growing industries.



Stipends and enhanced advising to drive equitable outcomes

All students receive stipends and have access to a team of advisors who specialize in serving high school students. Tailored advising is available for financial aid, for GEAR UP students, and for students requiring disability accommodations and mental health supports.



2+2 pathways and transfer supports to public universities

The **University of Vermont** offers 30 pathways that guarantee junior status for CCV transfer students.

As a sister institution using a common transcript and program pathways, **Vermont State University** is working to ensure seamless transfer pathways.

Here's how the Free Degree Promise pathway works for Donovan:

Donovan blended full-time college courses with paid work at his town's only grocery store. Through one of his CCV courses, he has completed a 100-hour internship with the accounting team at the nonprofit organization that runs the grocery.



11TH GRADE

Applied to Early College at CCV

Donovan had completed most higher-level math courses at his rural school. He was advised to consider Early College by his school counselor.



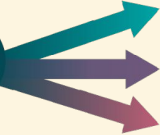
Graduate from Richford High School

Donovan graduated from high school in June 2024 with a bookkeeping certificate and 30 credits toward his degree.



Graduate with Free Degree in Accounting

Donovan will be prepared to land a promising job or continue toward a bachelor's degree. There are projected to be over 7,000 accounting jobs in Vermont over the next 10 years with salaries above the state median.



"The thing I'm most excited about is being able to get into what I want to do at a young age."

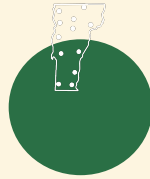
With an associate degree, I could get a great accounting job at the age of 19. That feels like a really big win for me."

In a state with the lowest college continuation rates in New England, a free, fast-tracked associate degree is a game changer for Vermont youth.

Since the Free Degree Promise was announced in spring 2022:

- CCV has seen a 150% increase in the number of low-income students in the Early College Program (113 in fall 2024).
- Triple the number of Early College completers are continuing their near-full-time enrollment at CCV.
- Over half of this year's Free Degree Promise cohort are first-generation college-going students.

Vermont's enabling conditions are strong:



a single statewide community college. The Community College of Vermont serves the greatest number of Vermonters of any college in the state via 12 locations and extensive learning options. 25% of CCV students are high school students.



publicly funded Early College. Vermont has a 10-year history of offering a free year of full-time college in lieu of a traditional 12th grade. Most participating students have historically enrolled at CCV.



established cross-sector partnerships. A diverse team of intermediaries and partners is working to further improve equity and to sustain the Promise beyond the Vermont high school class of 2026. The cross-sector Early College Equity Working Group has spent years analyzing data and data systems, exploring promising practices, and addressing barriers.

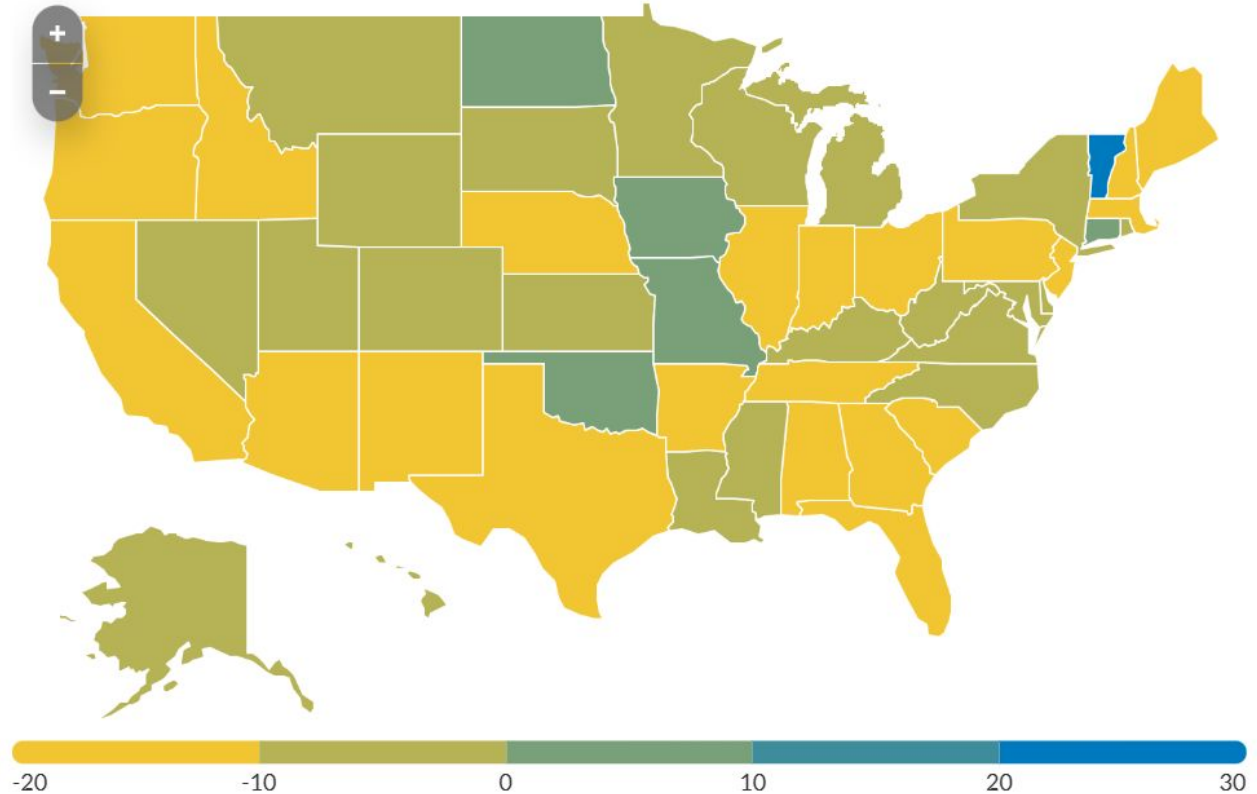


public investments in college affordability. Facing a shrinking workforce, policymakers are committed to investing in talent, especially through community college (ex: 802Opportunity Program).

What we learned from our grad gift to the VT high school class 2020: Easily accessible community college is a gamechanger for young adults.

Percentage change in community college enrollment rates of recent high school graduates

2020 cohort compared to 2019 cohort, by student state of residence



Source: College Board, "College Enrollment and Retention in the Era of Covid," June 2021.

State of the State



Vermont is the most rural state, with 65% living in rural areas and 76% of the state's ~22,000 grade 9-12 students attending rural high schools

CENSUS, VT AOE



Vermont's high school graduates continue to college at the lowest rates in New England (45%).

Low-income students, Black students, students with disabilities, and male students face the deepest equity gaps in continuation rates

NESSC



Rapidly declining college aspirations among youth since 2020 signal that continuation rates will sink lower.

This decline is most significant among first-generation young men: 58% to 45%

VSAC



College degrees, especially associate degrees, have enduring value.

Associate degree graduates in Vermont are the most likely in the country to achieve a positive ROI (79 percent)

SIRADA

Inspiring hope

In a state with lots of narrowly scoped scholarships, only easily understood pathways available to all can transform youth and family perception that college is within reach.



Universality

All students can apply and choose any CCV degree.



Support beyond tuition

All students get living stipends and enhanced advising. CCV is supported to promote, administer, and evaluate the pathways.



Rural is an asset

Young people are known and all adults are navigators.



VT's Free Degree Promise

Core Values

CCV degrees give Vermonters what they need – a good paycheck, meaningful work, and connection to community – while at the same time giving Vermont what it needs by filling critical occupations.

Free Degree Promise students' 2024 degree pathways at CCV:

- Health Care: 30%
- Business: 18%
- Liberal Studies: 16%
- STEM, including IT: 15%
- Art, Design & Media: 11%
- Education & Early Childhood: 7%

CCV degrees align with VT's labor market needs

as defined by the VT Department of Labor and McClure Foundation's [Most Promising Vermont Jobs campaign](#).
CCV degrees listed here are aligned with the bachelor's degrees required to obtain some featured occupations.

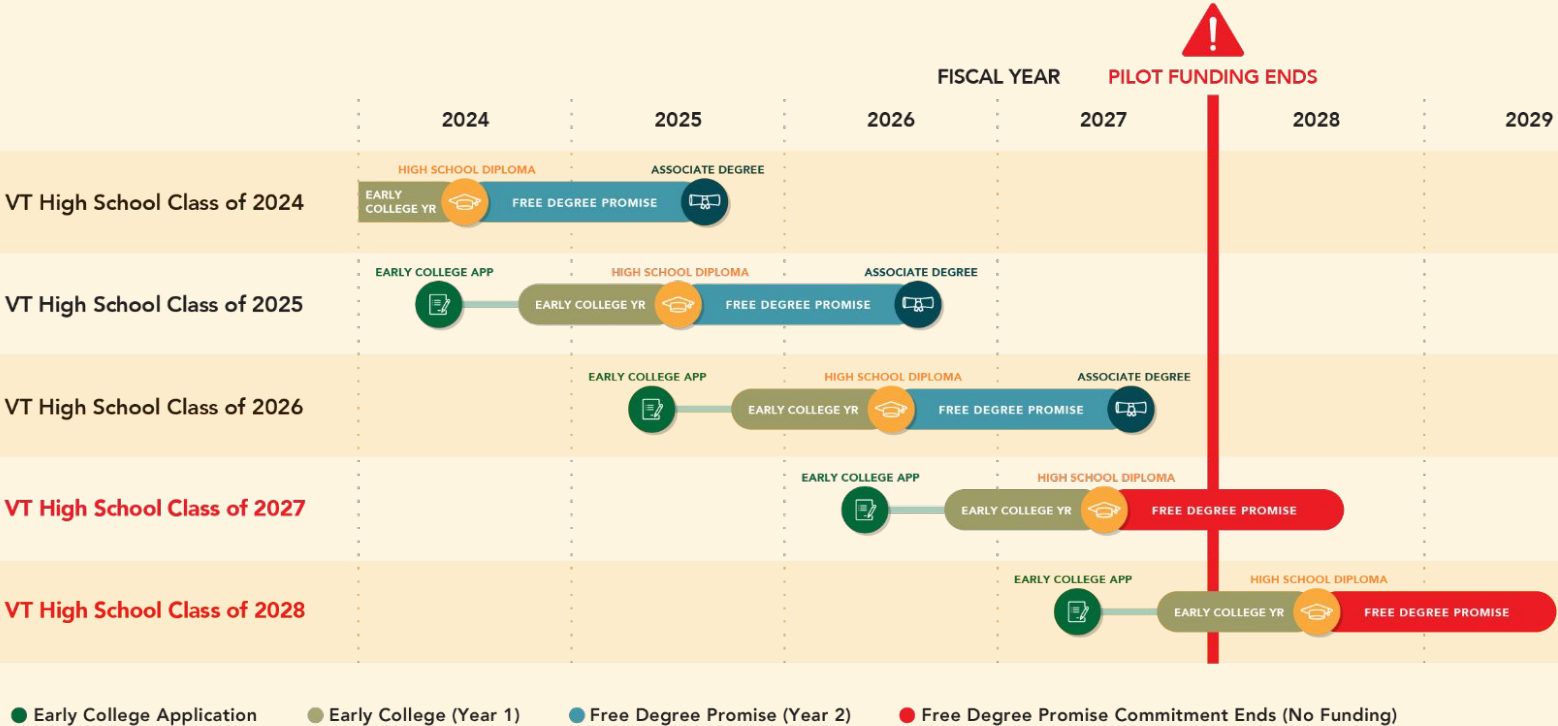
	10-Year Projected Openings	Median Wage (hourly/yearly)	Degree
Environmental Scientists	360	\$36/\$74,791	Associate of Science: Environmental Science
Teachers, including Special Education & CTE	7,460	n.a./\$67,717	Associate of Arts: Early Childhood Education
Editors, Writers & Authors	1,100	\$36/\$75,010	Associate of Arts: Liberal Studies
Accountants & Auditors	2,280	\$38/\$78,221	Associate of Science: Accounting
Healthcare, Substance Use Disorder & Mental Health Social Workers	1,040	\$33/\$67,874	Associate of Science: Behavioral Science
Management Analysts	1,700	\$55/\$113,493	Associate of Science: Business
Laboratory Technologists	480	\$39/\$81,939	Associate of Science: STEM Studies
Registered Nurses	4,570	\$42/\$87,117	Associate of Science: Health Science
Computer Support Specialists	1,660	\$32/\$67,025	Associate of Science: Information Technology
Project Management Specialists	710	\$41/\$84,329	Associate of Science: Professional Studies
Mechanical Engineering	410	\$50/\$104,221	Associate of Science: STEM Studies



Vision for 2027

Vermont's young people can count on the availability of debt-free accelerated associate degree pathways. These pathways are driving improved college continuation among first-generation, low-income, students of color, and young men.

Vermont's Free Degree Promise: Funding Coverage





Envisioning funding sustainability

In FY28, the Free Degree Promise will be sustained for the Vermont high school class of 2027 and beyond with an ongoing General Fund appropriation from the State of Vermont.



**>\$2M
General
Fund**