Vermont State GEAR UP GUIDE Program

Overview and initial findings

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the support provided by Vermont State GEAR UP (VSGU) for students transitioning from high school through their first year of postsecondary education. The program, Giving Undergraduates Important Direction in their Education (GUIDE), aims to provide a successful transition from high school to postsecondary education for VSGU students. To do this, GUIDE supports students during the transition into and through their first year of college by providing direct support to students and introducing them to the networks and resources they need in order to have successful college experiences. VSGU and its GUIDE program are administered by the Vermont Student Assistance Corporation (VSAC).

The report includes:

- Background on the need for programs like GUIDE that target support to students transitioning into postsecondary education
- An overview of the GUIDE program, including its goals, services for students, collaborative partners, and general approach
- Initial findings from the first two GUIDE cohorts (2013 and 2014 high school graduates)

Highlighted results include:

- Quantitative data regarding the educational trajectories for the first two cohorts of GUIDE students (VSGU high school graduates from the classes of 2013 and 2014).
  - Among the first two cohorts of GUIDE students, **64% enrolled in postsecondary education within the first academic year following high school graduation.** Comparatively, the New England Secondary School Consortium (NESSC) Common Data Project reported postsecondary enrollment rates of 35% and 37% for low-income Vermont high school graduates in 2013 and 2014, respectively (NESSC, 2014; 2015).
  - **Two-thirds of GUIDE students who enrolled in postsecondary education chose institutions within Vermont.** The clear majority (over 82%) of in-state enrollees attended public institutions rather than private, whereas students who attended out of state chose private institutions more frequently than public.
  - Of GUIDE students who enrolled in two- or four-year postsecondary institutions, **83% persisted into their second year.** By comparison, low-income Vermonters statewide from the graduating classes of 2013 and 2014 persisted at rates of 67% and 79%, respectively (NESSC, 2015; 2016)
  - Degree completion information was available for the 2013 GUIDE cohort only. Of students who enrolled in two- or four-year postsecondary institutions in fall of 2013, **44% completed a degree within four years. An additional 26% stayed enrolled after four years, suggesting that they continued working toward their degrees.** By comparison, only 29% of low-income Vermonters statewide completed degrees within four years of entering college in 2011 (NESSC, 2016).

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- Qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews with five GUIDE participants to seek feedback about students' experiences with the program.
  - Findings confirmed that the GUIDE program provides crucial support to students transitioning into college. Each student discussed multiple GUIDE services they had used during college, and each identified at least one such service that they perceived as instrumental to their ability to persist.
  - Interviews revealed that GUIDE support was often invisible to the GUIDE students themselves. Although these students expressed a clear understanding of the utility of specific services, they were often unaware of the role GUIDE played in providing and/or connecting them to these resources.
  - Interviews highlighted that GUIDE students had the knowledge and confidence to seek out information and support when they needed it, skills they honed through years of consistent support provided by VSGU and GUIDE. This reflects GUIDE's approach to service delivery, which focuses on setting up support networks and resources for students to access themselves and then nudging students toward them.

As the GUIDE program continues to evolve, these initial results will help inform decisions about ways to optimize the support it provides to Vermont's students. The report concludes with a discussion of the ways GUIDE has changed through the years to meet student needs and potential directions for future research.

Introduction

National context

Income inequality is growing across the nation and is linked to educational attainment. While median earnings among young adults remained relatively flat between 1979 and 2013, the percentage of young adults living in poverty doubled during the same period (Pew Research Center, 2014). The rise in income inequality has disproportionately affected those with less education: While the poverty rate among bachelor's degree holders grew from 3% to 6%, poverty among those with only a high school diploma more than tripled, from 7% to 22% (Pew Research Center, 2014). Likewise, median earnings among young adults with bachelor's degrees increased 17% between 1965 and 2013, whereas earnings among all other high school graduates fell more than 10% over the same time period (Pew Research Center, 2014).

College is also becoming more expensive. According to a 2018 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the average cost of attending public institutions nationwide quadrupled between 1986 and 2016, rising from less than $4,000 to over $16,000 per year for a full-time student (NCES, 2018, p. 602). Even after adjusting for inflation, the cost of attending public postsecondary institutions more than doubled during this time (NCES, 2018, p. 602). This means that even though education remains an important path to higher earning potential, access to this path is increasingly dependent on one's ability to pay.

Family income level has been identified as a primary factor in college enrollment and success for students nationwide. College enrollment rates among recent high school graduates differed markedly by income: Among the Class of 2015, only 69.2% of low-income students enrolled in college, while 83.2%

of higher-income students enrolled (NCES, 2018, p. 415). Income-based disparities continue well beyond initial college enrollment. Among students who enrolled in a four-year college, 49.5% of low-income students obtained a degree within six years, compared with 63.9% of middle-income students and 76.8% of higher-income students (NCES, 2018, p. 592). A similar pattern existed among students who enrolled in two-year colleges, where the completion rate was 30.6% among low-income students and between five and eight percentage points higher among all other income groups (NCES, 2018, p. 592). [1]

Students from low-income, rural high schools represent a particularly vulnerable group in terms of college enrollment. A report by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC) indicates that only 44% of students from low-income, rural high schools enroll in postsecondary education (NSCRC, 2015). By comparison, 54% of low-income students from non-rural schools enroll in college, and 64% of higher-income students from rural schools enroll (NSCRC, 2015). [2]

Vermont context

Compared with the nation overall, Vermont excels in supporting students in their transitions into and through high school. Approximately 88% of Vermont students who start the ninth grade successfully complete high school within four years, compared with 84% nationally (NCES, 2018, p. 217). Vermont students also graduate college at rates that exceed the national average: Across Vermont's public, four-year postsecondary institutions, the 2013 postsecondary four-year graduation rate was 52.5% and the six-year rate was 65.3%, compared with the national averages of 33.3% and 57.6% (for four-year and six-year rates, respectively) for this type of postsecondary institution (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2015).

However, Vermont is not insulated from national economic trends, and the same relationships between poverty and low educational achievement are evident in the state. Between 1980 and 2015, Vermont's middle class shrank nearly 12% and income inequality grew (Public Assets Institute, 2016). By 2015, Vermont's overall poverty rate was 10%, but the poverty rate for Vermonters who did not finish high school was over 20%, while Vermonters with bachelor's degrees had a poverty rate of just 3.8% (Public Assets Institute, 2016). This rising income inequality has serious implications for higher education attainment. In Vermont, economically disadvantaged students graduate from high school at lower rates, enroll and persist in postsecondary education programs at lower rates, and earn college degrees at lower rates than their higher-income peers (NESSC, 2017). Despite Vermont's educational strengths, more work is needed to close the state's higher education achievement gap.

Overview of Vermont State GEAR UP and its GUIDE Program

VSAC administers the federally funded Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) grant for the state of Vermont. Vermont State GEAR UP (VSGU) aims to serve students from modest-income backgrounds or students who are the first in their families to attend college. The goal of the program is to increase students' educational expectations, knowledge of postsecondary

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[1] For NCES college enrollment data, low-income students were in the bottom 20% of family income, and high-income students were in the top 20% of family income. For NCES college completion data, low-income students were in the bottom 25% of family income, high-income students were in the top 25% of family income, and middle-income students were between.

[2] For both the NSCRC report and VSGU, a low-income high school was defined as one having more than 50% of its students receiving Free and Reduced-Price Lunch.

education options, academic performance and preparation for postsecondary education, high school graduation rates, and rates of enrolling and persisting in postsecondary education. In 2017, VSGU served students in 52 low-income, primarily rural middle schools and high schools (grades 7–12) statewide. VSGU provides participating students and their families with services such as career and college counseling, academic support, college visits, and information related to postsecondary planning and financial aid.

In 2012, VSGU expanded its services with the creation of the GUIDE (Giving Undergraduates Important Direction in their Education) program, which aims to extend support beyond high school as students transition into postsecondary education. The GUIDE program was designed to increase college enrollment and persistence by providing outreach and support to VSGU students during their transition from high school to college and through their first year of college. All students who participated in VSGU and graduated from high school in 2013 or later were eligible to enroll in GUIDE. This report focuses on the first two cohorts of GUIDE students from the high school graduating classes of 2013 and 2014.

Services provided to the 2013 and 2014 GUIDE student cohorts

GUIDE Services Provided from End of Senior Year of High School Through First Year in College

- One-on-one "on call" counseling support from VSGU staff (in person, over email, and over the phone)
- Text messaging services to remind students of important upcoming milestones and deadlines, customized based on postsecondary enrollment (in-state vs. out-of-state, four-year vs. two-year, etc.)
- Access to a VSAC-supported Facebook group for VSGU GUIDE Scholars, providing weekly links and updates with relevant transitional information for first-year college students (VSGU staff monitored the page and answered questions)

GUIDE Services Provided Before Students Began College

- Copies of the VSGU-created GEAR UP Resource Guide to College Success
- Senior class workshops led by VSGU staff to:
  - Distribute and review the GEAR UP Resource Guide to College Success
  - Provide an opportunity to discuss the GUIDE program
  - Discuss how to access the VSGU scholarship (ranged from $1,000–$2,000 annually, renewable for up to four years)
- Invitations to several accepted-student receptions held across Vermont in June for VSGU high school seniors and parents to acknowledge acceptance into college and discuss next steps related to financial aid and the transition to college

GUIDE Services Provided During Students' First Year of College

- In-person fall meetings with VSGU staff held on individual campuses (Vermont campuses only)
- Personal outreach to students by VSGU staff to engage them in campus-based resources
- Access to college peer mentors, some of whom were former VSGU high school students (Vermont State Colleges only)
- Financial aid help provided via one-on-one meetings with VSGU staff (virtual or in-person) or workshops (on Vermont campuses only) held by VSGU staff in collaboration with on-campus offices
- Small care packages from VSGU staff (select students on Vermont campuses who were identified as struggling during first semester either by self-report or through communication with on-campus staff)

GUIDE Services for Students at Vermont Institutions Varied by Campus

As indicated above, all GUIDE students had access to key resources (e.g., one-on-one support from VSGU staff), but students enrolled within the state of Vermont had access to additional GUIDE services that varied by postsecondary institution. Each Vermont college campus developed a slightly different program/intervention in collaboration with VSGU to provide ongoing support to VSGU students through the GUIDE program. The GUIDE team worked closely with college partners to support Vermont campuses with new ideas, staff-led workshops, and funding targeted to first-generation and low-income populations. Each partnership was specifically tailored to encourage best practices as defined by the college and the GUIDE program, with GUIDE services complementing existing campus programs.

VSGU staff worked individually with Vermont college campuses to evaluate key existing services for first-year students, including peer mentoring, professional and peer tutoring, financial literacy workshops and training, orientation, and other first-year experience activities and events. Next, VSGU staff worked to support and improve campus resources by designing and disseminating information and providing in-person consultation to college staff and student participants when needed. GUIDE also supplied funding to colleges to support these enhancements. In the academic year 2013, this amount totaled just over $10,000, and the following year it rose to over $42,000. It is important to emphasize that because many GUIDE services were delivered to students through on-campus offices and networks, the role of GUIDE itself was often invisible to the students. However, by collaborating directly with campus offices in this way, GUIDE ensured that its staff and funds would be used effectively at each institution to support rather than supplant existing campus programming.

Examples of GUIDE services provided to Vermont college campuses included:

- Assistance in the planning and implementation of enhanced summer orientation programming for students and parents (In some cases, this involved VSGU staff traveling to campuses to co-present the new curricula, using a train-the-trainer approach.)
- Campus-based financial literacy programming for first year students, including financial aid workshops co-led by VSGU staff and campus financial aid personnel
- Access to a VSGU GUIDE liaison who was identified at every Vermont college campus where GUIDE students were enrolled
- Financial resources to improve campus programming designed to promote student persistence, such as summer bridge programs, peer tutoring, peer mentoring, and parent orientation programming

GUIDE data collection practices

Information about GUIDE participants is collected for federal reporting purposes, for internal use to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, and to track progress of individual students to provide them better support. VSGU has protocols and procedures in place to ensure that all data remain secure and confidential, and that the program adheres to FERPA.

Summary of the GUIDE approach

GUIDE support differs markedly from the hands-on approach VSGU uses for grades 7–12. For these earlier grades, VSGU emphasizes direct contact with students by VSGU staff through regular one-on-one meetings, workshops, and staff-led events. In contrast, GUIDE aims to set students up for success by connecting them to the networks and resources they will need at their new institutions; supporting and enhancing those resources; monitoring student progress through college staff; and contacting students

only occasionally to offer help, reminders, or encouragement. Connecting GUIDE students to information and campus resources provides them with the knowledge and opportunity to practice self-advocacy, while academic monitoring and periodic check-ins allow for GUIDE staff to step in with more direct support if needed. Although this behind-the-scenes approach makes GUIDE support less visible to college students compared with the direct contact they received in middle school and high school, it allows GUIDE to function as a bridge to independence for participants.

Initial Research Findings

This section presents data gathered from early participants of the GUIDE program. Part One uses quantitative data to provide an overview of the educational trajectories for two participant cohorts. Part Two uses qualitative data to provide insights into students' experiences with the GUIDE program. The specific questions addressed in each section are outlined below.

Part one: educational trajectories (quantitative data)
- How many GUIDE participants enrolled at postsecondary education institutions?
- What kinds of institutions did GUIDE participants choose?
- To what degree have GUIDE participants persisted in college and completed degrees?

Part two: student experiences and perceptions (qualitative data)
- How do GUIDE participants use GUIDE services?
- How do GUIDE participants perceive the role and value of GUIDE services in their ability to successfully access, adjust to, and persist in the college environment?

Part one: educational trajectories

Participants and Methodology
Participants who were studied for this report were VSGU students from the high school graduating classes of 2013 and 2014, with a focus on those who continued into postsecondary education and participated in the GUIDE program. VSGU offered these students GUIDE support services the spring of their senior year through their first year of college. VSGU used the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) to verify postsecondary student enrollment, persistence, and completion. VSGU supplemented NSC enrollment records using Vermont Incentive Grant disbursement records from VSAC, allowing VSGU to include in these findings data from institutions that do not report to the NSC (primarily non-degree programs). For students to qualify as enrolled in a given postsecondary education institution in a given academic year, (a) the NSC must list them as enrolled in that institution for at least 10 days beginning between August 1 and the following May 1, or (b) VSAC records must confirm that Vermont Incentive Grant funds were disbursed on behalf of the student to that institution during the specified academic year.

Postsecondary Enrollment: Overall Rates and Timing of Initial Enrollment
The high school senior class projected to graduate in 2013 included a total of 316 VGSU students (see Table 1; Figure 1). A total of 288 (91%) graduated by the summer of 2013. Among these, 188 (65% of graduates) enrolled in postsecondary education during the academic year immediately following graduation, and 11 (4%) enrolled after one gap year. Six students enrolled after two or three gap years, leaving only 83 students (29% of graduates) who did not enroll within four years of graduating from high school.

The 2014 cohort was slightly larger, with a total of 375 students. Apart from a slightly lower 2014 high school graduation rate of 85%, educational trajectories were remarkably similar between cohorts: 64% of 2014 high school graduates enrolled in postsecondary education immediately, and 30% did not enroll within four years of graduation. Details for both cohorts are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 below.
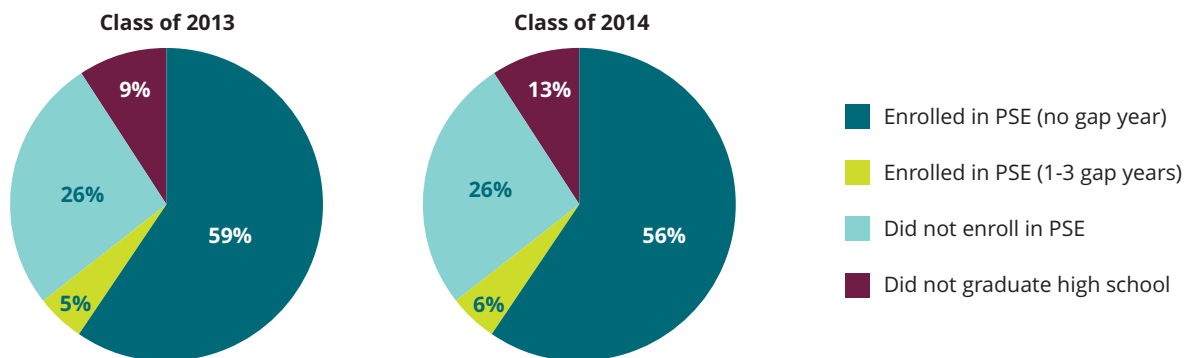
Statistics on immediate postsecondary enrollment from the Common Data Project indicate that GUIDE cohorts outperformed their low-income peers within Vermont and exceeded Vermont's statewide rate. Among high school graduates of 2013, 65% of GUIDE students enrolled in postsecondary education immediately, compared to 35% of low-income Vermonters and 52% of students statewide (NESSC, 2014). Similarly, among 2014 graduates, GUIDE students enrolled at a rate of 64% compared to 37% among low-income students and 52% statewide (NESSC, 2015). [3]

Table 1: Educational trajectories of 2013 and 2014 student cohorts

	Class of 2013	Class of 2014
Total students in original cohort	316	375
Did not graduate HS in the projected academic year	28 (8.9%)	47 (12.5%)
Enrolled in PSE immediately (no gap year)	188 (59.4%)	209 (55.7%)
Enrolled in PSE after 1 gap year	11 (3.5%)	15 (4.0%)
Enrolled in PSE after 2 or 3 gap years	6 (1.9%)	6 (1.6%)
Did not enroll in PSE within 4 years of HS graduation	83 (26.3%)	98 (26.1%)
Total high school graduates	288	328
Enrolled in PSE immediately (no gap year)	188 (65.3%)	209 (63.7%)
Enrolled in PSE within 4 years of HS graduation	205 (71.2%)	230 (70.1%)
Did not enroll in PSE within 4 years of HS graduation	83 (28.8%)	98 (29.9%)

PSE = postsecondary education; HS = high school

Figure 1: Educational trajectories of 2013 and 2014 student cohorts

Class of 2013 | Class of 2014

- Enrolled in PSE (no gap year)
- Enrolled in PSE (1-3 gap years)
- Did not enroll in PSE
- Did not graduate high school

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[3] NESSC postsecondary enrollment rates included only students who started at a two- or four-year degree-granting institution during the fall term following high school graduation. When we excluded students in non-degree programs and students who began after the fall term, enrollment rates for both GUIDE cohorts still exceeded 60%.

Postsecondary Enrollment: Types and Locations of Institutions

This section of the report focuses on students from each GUIDE cohort who enrolled in postsecondary institutions immediately (i.e., with no gap year). Among immediate enrollees from the Class of 2013, close to one-third enrolled out of state and the rest enrolled in higher education institutions within Vermont (see Table 2). Of students who enrolled in state, the majority enrolled in public institutions (86%) rather than private institutions (14%). Among students who enrolled out of state, similar numbers of students attended public versus private institutions. Results for the students from the Class of 2014 followed a similar pattern, with the exceptions of a slightly higher rate of enrollment in private, out-of-state institutions and a slightly lower rate of enrollment in public, in-state institutions among this group (see Table 3).

Table 2: Initial postsecondary enrollment institution types: 2013 GUIDE cohort

CLASS OF 2013	In-State	Out-of-State	Total
Public	114 (60.6%)	26 (13.8%)	140 (74.5%)
Private	19 (10.1%)	29 (15.4%)	48 (25.5%)
Total (Percent)	133 (70.7%)	55 (29.3%)	188

Table 3: Initial postsecondary enrollment institution types: 2014 GUIDE cohort

CLASS OF 2013	In-State	Out-of-State	Total
Public	103 (49.3%)	25 (12.0%)	128 (61.2%)
Private	27 (12.9%)	54 (25.8%)	81 (38.8%)
Total (Percent)	130 (62.2%)	79 (37.8%)	209

It is not surprising that most VSGU GUIDE students enrolled in Vermont institutions because many have competing responsibilities, including family commitments and jobs outside of school. For these students, in-state options (particularly public institutions) can be more affordable and accessible, especially when they allow students to commute from home. Among the students who attended out of state, private institutions were more popular. Factors that draw students out of state, such as an institution's prestige or unique program of study, may be more applicable for private than public institutions. Private schools may also offer higher aid or scholarships targeted to applicants from underrepresented groups.

Postsecondary Persistence

This section of the report focuses on the degree to which GUIDE participants who enrolled in post-secondary programs persisted in those programs consistently from year to year. Persistence was defined as re-enrolling each subsequent academic year, regardless of semesters off during that year. For the purpose of this report, students who left school but had already completed their programs were grouped with those who persisted, but students who left school for a full academic year or more without first completing their programs were counted as failing to persist.[4] Completion was defined as having graduated from a two- or four-year institution with a bachelor's degree, associate degree, or other credential

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[4] We chose this definition of persistence to emphasize the importance of students consistently progressing through their programs each year. However, some students who take a year or more off from school do eventually return: In both cohorts, just over 20% of students who failed to re-enroll during their second year ultimately returned to school later.

(e.g., certificate) as recognized by the NSC. For persistence and completion calculations, we limited our sample to those students who enrolled immediately in two- or four-year degree-granting postsecondary institutions, a decision that excluded a total of 10 students. [5]

For the classes of 2013 and 2014, a total of 387 GUIDE students enrolled in two- or four-year postsecondary institutions immediately following graduation. Of these, 83% persisted into their second year. Furthermore, 75% persisted into their third year and 68% persisted into their fourth year or completed their degrees prior to that point.

Persistence rates varied somewhat between the 2013 and 2014 GUIDE student cohorts. Data are presented separately for each cohort in Table 4 and Figure 2. The 2013 GUIDE students who enrolled in college immediately persisted to their second year at a rate of 79%, whereas the rate for 2014 GUIDE students was 86%. By comparison, the Common Data Project reported that low-income Vermont students entering college in 2013 and 2014 persisted at rates of 67% and 79% respectively (NESSC, 2015; 2016). These results highlight the fact that although persistence rates vary from year to year, GUIDE students have reliably maintained persistence rates higher than their peers.

Table 4: Postsecondary persistence following initial enrollment at 2- and 4-year institutions

	Class of 2013	Class of 2014
Total students enrolled in 2- or 4-year PSE immediately	183	204
Left PSE after year 1 without completing	38 (20.8%)	29 (14.2%)
Persisted into year 2 or completed prior	145 (79.2%)	175 (85.8%)
Persisted into year 3 or completed prior	135 (73.8%)	155 (76.0%)
Persisted into year 4 or completed prior	124 (67.8%)	140 (68.6%)

Figure 2: Postsecondary persistence following initial enrollment at 2- and 4-year institutions

Class of 2013 / Class of 2014

Left school after Y1 — Persisted into Y2 only — Persisted into Y3 only — Persisted into Y4

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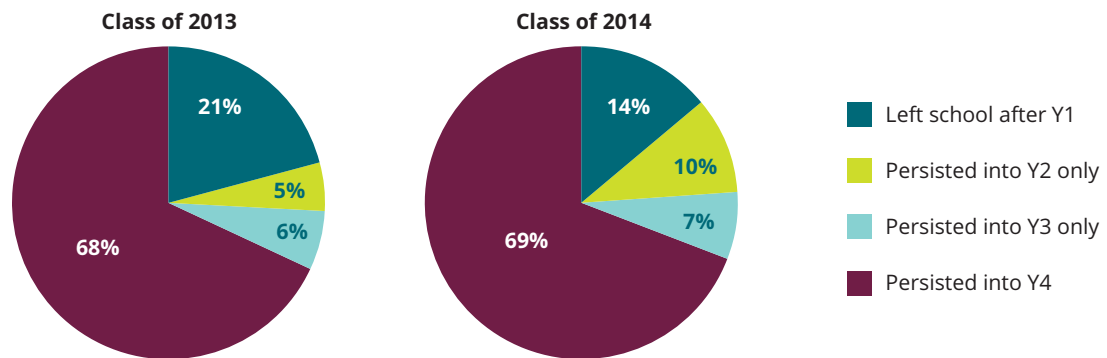
[5] The 10 excluded students were enrolled in non-degree granting institutions that offer short-duration programs in cosmetology, automotive or other technical fields, photography, and religion. We excluded students enrolled at these institutions because (a) it does not make sense to calculate persistence to the second year for programs with shorter durations, and (b) it was not possible to verify any certificates or credentials earned at these institutions because they do not report to the NSC. These students' experiences do point to the need for better verification sources for certificates and credentials.
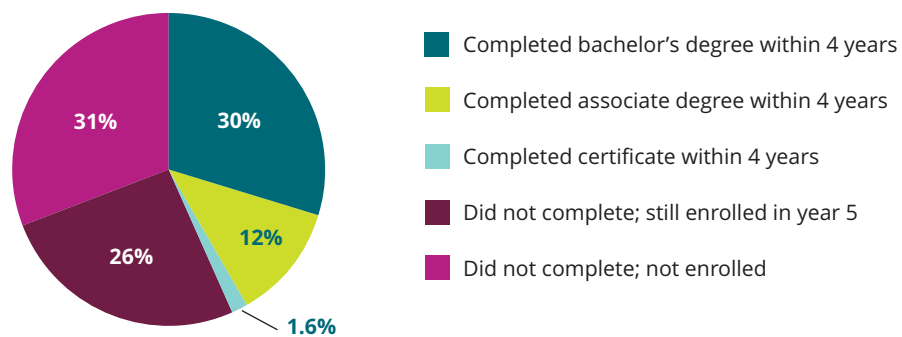
Postsecondary Completion

At the time of this report, four-year completion data were available for the 2013 GUIDE students only. Completion results focus on all 183 GUIDE students who graduated high school in 2013 and enrolled immediately in a degree-granting two- or four-year postsecondary institution, regardless of enrollment intensity (full- vs. part-time) or subsequent time off.

Within four academic years, 55 (30%) of these students earned bachelor's degrees, 22 (12%) earned associate degrees, and 3 (1.6%) earned certificates or other recognized credentials. A total of 80 GUIDE students[6] completed their programs within the four academic years following high school graduation, for a four-year completion rate of 43.7%. By comparison, results from the Common Data Project showed that 29% of low-income Vermont students completed their programs within four years of enrolling in two- or four-year colleges (NESSC, 2016), a rate nearly 15 percentage points lower than the rate for GUIDE students.

It is important to recognize that many students who ultimately graduate college take longer than four years to do so. Nationwide college completion rates increase by 40–50% when measured over six years, as opposed to four years (NSC, 2018). For this reason, six-year college completion rates are often reported in addition to or instead of four-year rates. The Common Data Project reported a six-year completion rate of 49% among low-income Vermont students (NESSC, 2017). Although six-year completion information for GUIDE students was not yet available when this report was prepared, the Class of 2013 GUIDE cohort was well positioned to exceed 49%: GUIDE students had already achieved a rate of 44% completion in only four years, and an additional 26% were still enrolled during year five, suggesting that they were still working toward their degrees. Taken together, over 69% of GUIDE participants either completed their programs or were still enrolled four years later. These results are summarized in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Postsecondary completion among GUIDE Class of 2013 graduates who enrolled immediately in 2- or 4-year postsecondary institutions

- Completed bachelor's degree within 4 years
- Completed associate degree within 4 years
- Completed certificate within 4 years
- Did not complete; still enrolled in year 5
- Did not complete; not enrolled

30% 31% 12% 26% 1.6%

Variations in Postsecondary Persistence and Completion Rates by institution

To explore the extent to which students' outcomes varied by institution, we separated students into five groups according to where they initially enrolled and calculated persistence and completion rates for each. Persistence outcomes combined the 2013 and 2014 GUIDE cohorts, and completion outcomes included students from the 2013 cohort only. As in the persistence and completion sections above,

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[6] Two additional GUIDE students completed programs within four years but are not included in this number because they enrolled in postsecondary education after one or more gap years.

results are limited only to those students who enrolled in two- or four-year institutions without a gap year. Results do not distinguish between students who remained enrolled at their starting institution and those who transfered to a different institution.

Results are summarized in Table 5 below. Students who enrolled at University of Vermont (UVM) showed the highest rates of persistence and completion, followed by those who enrolled in out-of-state institutions. The four institutions classified as Vermont State Colleges (VSC) are Castleton University (CU), Community College of Vermont (CCV), Northern Vermont University (NVU), and Vermont Technical College (VTC). Of these, CCV is the only two-year institution. Students who initially enrolled at the CCV demonstrated the lowest persistence and completion rates of any group. Students who enrolled at the other three VSCs persisted at rates close to the overall cohort but completed at lower rates.

Table 5. Variations in postsecondary persistence and completion rates by institution

	CCV	CSU, NVU, VTC	UVM	Other VT	Out of State	Total
Students who enrolled in 2- or 4-year programs immediately (Class of 2013 + Class of 2014)	70	100	45	42	130	387
Left PSE after year 1 without completing	30.0%	19.0%	6.7%	14.3%	13.8%	17.3%
Persisted into year 2 or completed prior	70.0%	81.0%	93.3%	85.7%	86.2%	82.7%
Persisted into year 3 or completed prior	54.3%	74.0%	91.1%	76.2%	80.8%	74.9%
Persisted into year 4 or completed prior	45.7%	67.0%	91.1%	66.7%	73.8%	68.2%
Students who enrolled in 2- or 4-year programs immediately (Class of 2013 only)	34	55	23	17	54	183
Completed within 4 years	29.4%	34.5%	69.6%	41.2%	51.9%	43.7%
Did not complete but still enrolled	29.4%	30.9%	26.1%	17.6%	20.4%	25.7%
Completed within 4 years or still enrolled	58.8%	65.5%	95.7%	58.8%	72.2%	69.4%

The results demonstrate that students who initially enroll in different institutions persist and earn degrees at different rates. However, it is important to remember that student success is linked to a variety of hidden factors, such as academic preparation, finances, and long-term education goals, that likely drive these results. It is especially problematic to compare outcomes across two- and four-year institutions because students who begin at two-year institutions typically have more varied educational trajectories. For example, students aiming for an associate degree might demonstrate higher four-year completion rates than students aiming for a bachelor's degree, because even those who take extra time to pursue an associate degree can still complete in four years. By contrast, many students who enroll in two-year institutions before transferring to four-year institutions would likely take longer than four years to earn a bachelor's degree and would demonstrate a lower four-year completion rate as a result. Furthermore, some students may take classes without intending to earn any degree or certificate, which may be more common at two-year than four-year institutions. For these reasons, caution should be used when comparing completion rates across institutions.

Part two: student experiences and perceptions

Participants and Methodology

This section of the report summarizes findings from a series of interviews with students participating in the GUIDE program, which sought to explore Vermont State College students' perceptions of their post-secondary experience, especially as that experience related to supports offered through GUIDE.

Five GUIDE students at different stages of their college careers were interviewed in the spring of 2017 about their experience of the transition from a VSGU high school to a Vermont college and their persistence toward a college degree (see Appendix A for sample interview questions). Each interview was conducted by Dr. Kelly Clark-Keefe, a professor at the University of Vermont, on the participant's current college campus[7] and lasted approximately one hour. Table 6 provides background information about each participant. Participant-chosen pseudonyms were used to protect privacy.

Table 6. Interview participants and related information

Name (Gender)	Institutional Affiliation	Status of Matriculation	Degree Program
James (M)	Vermont Technical College	3rd-semester freshman (repeating several courses after struggles during first year)	2-year
Sam (F)	Vermont Technical College	2nd-semester junior (through early college program, accelerated completion by 1 year)	4-year
Lola (F)	Johnson State College	2nd-semester junior (transferred to JSC after freshman year)	4-year
Jewel (F)	Johnson State College	2nd-semester senior	4-year
Robin (F)	Castleton University	2nd-semester sophomore	4-year

Although the interviewer focused on these students' experiences leading up to and persisting in college more generally, this report focuses on gaining insight into the following two questions:

1) How do GUIDE participants use GUIDE services?
2) How do GUIDE participants perceive the role and value of GUIDE services in their ability to successfully access, adjust to, and persist in the collegiate environment?

Each interview transcript was reviewed for details relevant to the present report, and common themes are summarized in the sections that follow. All student quotations are included verbatim, with ellipses to indicate where words have been omitted for brevity.

Student Use of GUIDE Services

All five students used multiple services that the GUIDE program supported. Direct services the students mentioned included VSGU/GUIDE scholarship (two students), assistance with paperwork such as financial aid and college applications (three students), the texting platform (one student), and one-on-one assistance from a VSGU staff member while at college (two students).

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[7] One student conducted the interview over Skype due to a scheduling conflict.

GUIDE also supported students indirectly by providing consultation and resources (including funding and staff time) to campus-based programs and offices that served those students. For example, GUIDE supported summer bridge and orientation programs on campus and other services such as tutoring, counseling/mentoring, and financial literacy workshops. In their interviews, GUIDE students mentioned having taken advantage of GUIDE-supported resources, including summer bridge or orientation programs (two students), tutoring (four students), counseling/mentoring (four students), financial aid help (one student), and related special events on campus (two students).

Finally, GUIDE coordinated services with existing on-campus programs, connecting students to support networks and resources. To do this, VSGU/GUIDE staff provided the names of GUIDE participants to key campus staff members (e.g., Student Support Services office staff) to allow them to recruit and track each student and reach out when needed. VSGU/GUIDE staff also encouraged each student to use existing campus resources by introducing them to campus staff members to help them build support networks. Three students described visiting these campus offices just to socialize early on, but returning to access academic support resources later when needed. For example, Jewel described feeling comfortable visiting the academic support office on campus, saying, "I could pop in, say hi, grab a snack, and it's not judgmental … They welcome me, and 'Oh, how's it going?' and it's fine. It was like 'Oh cool, this is a spot I can go to,' and I have people that I like here." When Jewel struggled with classes later on, she turned to those staff members for support. By connecting students to the individuals providing on-campus services, GUIDE made it easier and more likely for students to access these supports.

Student Perceptions of GUIDE Service Use
While it is clear that these students all used GUIDE services while in college, in many cases they did not perceive the services as related to GUIDE or VSGU. For example, when asked whether she used GUIDE resources in college, Jewel responded, "I'm not quite sure." Lola was more confident, saying, "Not in college. Not really in college. I just remember going to panels in high school for first-generation GEAR UP students. So, not really throughout college." Despite her assertion, Lola went on to name a VSGU/GUIDE counselor (staff member) who worked with her before she transferred. Similarly, Sam stated that, "Other than having help with the FAFSA I can't really remember much," but he also referred to GUIDE's text messages ("I remember my second year getting text messages") and using GUIDE-supported campus-based services ("Like counselors that you can just go sit in and talk to and then they have the whole tutoring service …").

Examples like these demonstrate that students have little awareness of the people and resources that are linked to the GUIDE program. Furthermore, because students often refer to services based on the physical location in which they were received, it can be difficult to discern which were GUIDE services and which were existing campus resources (although regardless of the source of the services a student received at a campus office, GUIDE frequently played a role in getting students there in the first place). Although this is a positive sign in that it suggests GUIDE has succeeded in integrating its support seamlessly into the college environment, it means students are unable to reliably describe their experiences with the program. As such, to understand student perceptions regarding the utility of the GUIDE program, it is important to consider how the students perceive the services themselves. Viewing the student interviews this way, it becomes clear that all five students perceived GUIDE-supported services as instrumental in helping them access, adjust to, and persist through college.

Accessing college. It was clear that VSGU and GUIDE played a part in students' access to college. Every student referred to their VSGU/GUIDE counselor by name, whether or not they realized that individual was associated with GUIDE. Students also gave explicit examples of ways that counselors helped them decide to go to college, access financial resources, or complete necessary paperwork. For example, James told the interviewer, "The application [to college]—that was a little intense. It was very nerve wracking too … Thank god [my VSGU/GUIDE counselor] helped me with the college form too because I don't think I would have been able to [do it] myself." Others described their counselor's support in more general terms, such as "she just kept checking in" and "she helped me get to where I am today." Most important, because students did not always understand the sources of specific services or remember when they received them, it is difficult to know which were associated with VSGU overall and which with GUIDE until students had arrived on campus.

Transitioning and adjusting to college. Students perceived GUIDE and GUIDE-supported services as helpful during the transition to college life. For example, Robin explained, "When I first got here, I would meet with the VSAC [VSGU/GUIDE] counselor, and we'd talk about the other people in VSAC that are here and would set up with the older upperclassmen who would give us the orientation." Lola described feeling "lost through the transition, through transferring" from her first college to Johnson, a time when she also sought services from her VSGU/GUIDE counselor. Sam found GUIDE-supported services helpful in transitioning to college " 'cause of getting the hang of how college life is and all the work that's required of you and the level," and Jewel mentioned using them "to figure things out; [I] became more independent."

Persisting in college. Research has shown college persistence to be predicted by financial support, academic performance, and a sense of community or belonging on campus (Ishitani, 2006; Soria & Stebleton, 2012). When asked about resources that helped them persist in college, the students referred to GUIDE-supported services that address each of these factors.

1. When asked what was most important for her persistence in college, Jewel focused on the financial support she received from the VSGU GUIDE program: "One of the first things I can think of is money... the scholarship helped tremendously. It was like me wanting, and being able to like stay here, and not having to worry about that." Lola had a similar view, answering, "I think a lot of [the help] is financially."

2. Several students described academic support as crucial to their ability to keep up with academics in college. For example, James described having taken advantage of GUIDE-supported academic resources more in his second year because he was "interested in keeping myself going in the right direction" after serious academic struggles as a freshman. In his words, "At the end of my freshman year it got a little rough. Like grades … I stopped using the sources, which was a fatal error." Robin also described academic troubles early on, saying, "The end of my first semester here was very challenging because I was put into classes that I did not choose for myself … I had to struggle through them, and I ended up dropping my GPA a lot because I could not—I have trouble testing and everything." However, she emphasized the importance of consistent access to academic support throughout her college career, saying, "Since my freshman year of college … I talk with math tutors that they have here, the writing clinic that they have here, work on the computers … and it's gonna be till graduation, I have a feeling." Ultimately, she took the initiative to seek out additional supports for test-taking as well as continuing her heavy use of tutoring services.

3. In addition to academic support, GUIDE-supported services helped these students feel a sense of community and belonging in college. Sam appreciated having "people that you can— like counselors that you can just go sit in and talk to … I go in and I sit down and talk to somebody

when I need to relieve stuff." James described a strong and supportive relationship with the student mentor he was assigned to during the GUIDE summer bridge program: "I also go to him occasionally to talk if I have an issue with any type of situation. It's a comfortable environment." Robin mentioned how "you grow such a great relationship with your tutors," and Jewel formed close relationships with her tutors that went beyond academic support, telling the interviewer, "Yeah it was having that person you can go to … just for someone to really talk to about things. That was great." Finally, Lola's motivation for persisting in college was "also about the first generation, because I want to be a role model," implying that she perceived herself as a leader among other students like her.

Overall Impact of GUIDE Services

One striking similarity across these interviews was the students' exceptional ability to advocate for themselves and their needs. In the face of a challenge, these students demonstrated both the willingness to seek help and the knowledge necessary to do so, whether or not the solution involved GUIDE services. In many cases, several steps were needed to solve a problem, such as when Robin described first approaching her professor for advice and later turning to campus staff and tutors. Skills like problem-solving and self-advocacy are incredibly important for college success, but they must be learned. By providing consistent access to support and information throughout middle school, high school, and the transition to college, VSGU and GUIDE set these students up for success by teaching them (a) that various resources exist, (b) that using those resources is acceptable and even encouraged, and (c) how to go about accessing them.

Although these students may not realize the role of VSGU and GUIDE in shaping them over time, they clearly understand the importance of self-advocacy. This was most clearly conveyed by their responses to a question about what advice they would give to a student like them who was about to start college. Robin said, "I guess I would tell them that if you see that you're starting to struggle, go talk to your advisor or go talk to your professor" and "Even if you don't need it, I suggest you get a tutor." Jewel said using the services "may not feel like it's doing anything, but it so is … It's there to help you" and later simply added, "Utilize the things." James said, "If you're having any issues, go get help. That's the biggest thing. Don't think you can do it. If you're having issues, just better be safe than sorry."

Overall, these interviews demonstrated that the students were grateful for GUIDE-supported services and perceived them as instrumental in their college success, whether or not they identified the services as associated with the GUIDE program or with VSGU more generally. At the end of her interview, when asked if she had anything else she would like to share, Jewel replied, "Not really, but I know that I'm really grateful for these programs. They did help out significantly for me to be able to attend college and really, really do the thing. Like really get through it—and I got through the programs and through my college experience." When Robin was asked to reflect about her experience, she said, "Yeah, if these services weren't here, I wouldn't be sitting here with you talking today … I think I'd be working at McDonald's or something."

GUIDE Through the Years

When interpreting findings from the initial two years of the GUIDE program, it is important to consider how the program has evolved over time. When VSAC was awarded its GEAR UP grant in 2011, most other GEAR UP grantees chose to wait until the last year of their grant (after their younger students had progressed

through middle school and high school) to begin offering services related to postsecondary education transitioning and success. In contrast, VSGU chose to begin serving first-year postsecondary students in 2012, making it one of the first GEAR UP grantees to work with this population. Initially, GUIDE followed a caseload model in which a designated VSGU staff was assigned to serve a set list of GUIDE students beginning after they left high school. However, it proved difficult for staff to establish new relationships with students as they were transitioning to college. It was also challenging for staff to schedule regular, in-person meetings with students across multiple campuses and, in some cases, multiple states.

To address challenges such as these, the GUIDE approach to serving students has evolved since its inception to move away from a strict caseload model. Changes have focused on strengthening the hand-off of students from staff who support them during high school to staff who support them in college, enhancing virtual modes of support from staff, and building a sense of shared identity and support among GUIDE students.

For example, VSGU/GUIDE staff have increasingly relied on text messages as a primary means of communication with GUIDE students after they leave high school. Although staff still provide support via phone, email, and in person when needed, they have found that college students engage with them much more reliably via text than scheduled meetings. In 2015 VSGU began using a texting platform for GUIDE that allows automated text messages to be pre-programmed and sent simultaneously to large groups of students, with student responses accessible by both high school-focused VSGU staff and GUIDE-dedicated staff. Messages typically contain a brief reminder or question that prompts students to text back if they need help, and staff members field students' individual replies accordingly. This platform allows text messages to be used more purposefully to send targeted reminders, information, and nudges to students at pre-determined times in addition to supporting unscheduled text communications between staff and students.

VSGU is continuing to strengthen the transition from VSGU services in high school to GUIDE services in college by organizing GUIDE launch events at high schools each spring, providing more targeted communication by both VSGU and GUIDE staff throughout the summer; and by holding fall open houses on Vermont college campuses with college staff, VSGU counselors, and GUIDE staff. Furthermore, because the texting platform allows each student's messages to be viewed and answered by multiple staff members, students can build relationships with their newly assigned GUIDE staff over the course of summer, while still receiving occasional check-ins from more familiar staff. When fall semester begins, students already know and trust their GUIDE staff, making them more likely to participate actively in the GUIDE program by attending GUIDE events on campus and taking advantage GUIDE resources.

More recently, VSGU has begun implementing program improvements designed to strengthen GUIDE students' sense of community and commitment to their goals. Moving forward, GUIDE will develop structures to build relationships between current GUIDE students and GUIDE program alumni on campus, and will provide GUIDE students and alumni with mentoring opportunities in their home middle schools and high schools.

GUIDE will also continue to provide behind-the-scenes support to students by connecting them to support networks on campus, monitoring their progress, and encouraging them to access the resources available to help them persist and succeed in college. This systemic model aligns well to GEAR UP and its overarching mission.

Directions for Future Research

Although GUIDE is a relatively new program, early findings indicate that GUIDE is a promising addition to VSGU and can be a model for other similar programs across the country. Moving forward, it will be important to expand upon the descriptive data reported here and to incorporate more rigorous evaluation of the program's efficacy. VSGU plans to continue tracking college enrollment of both of the GUIDE cohorts studied here through six years past high school graduation to allow for calculation of four-year and six-year degree completion rates. VSGU will then be able to compare these data to statewide, regional, and national completion rates reported by other sources, giving important context for interpreting the education outcomes of GUIDE participants. As described previously, VSGU is increasingly tracking each student's participation in GUIDE activities while in college, providing detailed and objective measurements of the usage of each service. In the future, we can use these data to learn which aspects of GUIDE are most effective by conducting statistical analyses to measure the association of each service with college success.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

I would like to begin by learning a bit about your experience getting to college.

What influenced your decision?

What would you describe as the most important factors playing a role in getting to college?

Next, I would like to learn about the influence of the GEAR UP program on your persistence.

Was your membership in the GEAR UP program a factor in your getting to and persisting in your first year of college?

Were there any outreach or support activities that you took advantage of especially in your first year of college?

Thinking back to your freshman year, what circumstances influenced your choice to return to college after your first year?

If I asked you to think of a metaphor that describes your efforts to persist—to keep going—through college, what would it be?