

# **Interest of Adult Vermonters in Continuing their Formal Education Opportunities for Education Providers**

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## **Executive Summary**

**Nearly 40% of adult Vermonters indicated they are not interested in continuing their formal education in a 2003 telephone survey. Of those interested in taking noncredit, credit, and on-line courses and/or pursuing a degree, significant differences exist among Vermonters of various ages, gender, educational background, family size, and geographic location. Non-credit courses in particular are of interest to relatively high percentages of older Vermonters; those who already have some college, 2-year, 4-year, and advanced degrees; Vermonters with household incomes greater than \$50,000; and those living in households with three or more children. Adult women are more interested in taking an online course than adult men, and surprisingly, the average age of Vermonters interested in taking an online course is 45 years (higher than those interested in taking either credit or degree courses). There seems to be a market for degree courses around the state. The results of this survey can guide providers of education to adult Vermonters in their programmatic decision-making and inform those engaged in policymaking and economic development efforts around the state about the need to increase the awareness of Vermonters of their responsibility to seek out education and training if they want to increase their quality of life or make more money.**

## **Introduction**

Adult Vermonters, like their counterparts throughout the United States, have been encouraged to embrace lifelong learning for many years (Kerka 2000). Nationwide, enrollment of adult students ages 25 and above in postsecondary education increased from 2.4 million in 1970 to 6.5 million in 2000 (Aslanian 2001). During that same period, the number of women learners tripled, and the number of adult learners aged 35 and over rose more than 2 ½ times (Kasworm, Sandmann, and Sissel 2000). The largest percentage of individuals aged 55 and over was engaged in non-credit continuing education (Imel 1997). Meanwhile, technological advances leading to greater access have supported the rapid growth of electronic learning in both the education and business sectors in the United States, and in 2002, an estimated 84% of two and four-year colleges offered distance education courses, up from 58% in 1998 (Commission on Technology and Adult Learning 2001; Imel 2002). In the United States, registration in online courses could increase to 50% of all enrollments (Edelson and Pittman 2001).

Despite these national trends, nearly 40% of adult Vermonters in 2003 indicated they are not interested in continuing their formal education. This report based on a telephone survey of Vermonters conducted by the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies in early 2003 explores the variation in interest among Vermonters of different gender, ages, educational attainment, and tenure in Vermont, in households of different income levels, and in families with and without children, those living rurally and living in suburban and urban settings, and those living in different regions. The report offers guidance to educational providers interested in knowing more about adult Vermonters' interest in taking credit, non-credit, online, and degree courses.

## Methods

The data used in this report were gathered as part of the 2003 Vermonter Poll, a telephone survey conducted annually by the University of Vermont Center for Rural Studies (CRS). The polling was conducted by UVM undergraduate and graduate students using computer-aided telephone interviewing between the hours of 4-9 p.m. in early March 2003. 674 randomly selected Vermonters at least 18 years old completed the telephone survey, and the results were analyzed using SPSS statistical software. The demographics included in this research are: education level, age, income, gender, county, rural/suburban/urban, and years in Vermont. The continuing education questions in the 2003 Vermonter Poll examined Vermonters' interest in attending non-credit, credit, and online courses and in pursuing a degree. The survey questions are included in Appendix A.

Several hypotheses were examined as part of this analysis including: Adult Vermonters with higher levels of educational background and household incomes are more likely to be interested in continuing their formal education. Women are more likely than men to be interested in continuing their education by taking courses. Vermonters living in rural areas and in households with children are more likely to be interested in online courses than those in urban areas and those without children. Younger adult Vermonters are more interested in taking credit and online courses and those leading toward degrees than older Vermonters, who are more likely to be interested in non-credit courses.

## Results

### *Age and Gender of Adult Vermonters Interested in Continuing their Education*

There is a relationship between age and continuing education interest. Table 1 presents the percentage of all adult Vermonters who are interested in each course option (non-credit, credit, online, degree) and the percentage of adult Vermonters who are under 50 years old or 50 years old or older interested in taking each type of course. 50.2% of respondents were under 50 years old.

**Table 1. Percentage of Adult Vermonters Interested in Courses of Various Types**

Type of course	Total	Under 50 years old	50 years old or older	$\chi^2$
Non-credit	44%	49%	40%	4.96**
Credit	37	56	18	101.41***
Online	36 (a)	45	26	25.39***
Toward a degree	31 (b)	49	12	104.00***

Notes: (a) N=662 (b) N=669 \*\* $\leq$ .05 \*\*\* $\leq$ .01

*Source:* Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont. 2003 Vermonter Poll. N=665

The average age of adult Vermonters interested in taking a course for non-credit, credit, online, or toward a degree is 46 years compared to an average of 56 years for Vermonters not interested in continuing their formal education (\*\*\*) $\leq$ .01). The average age of those interested in non-credit courses is 48 years, credit courses 41 years, online courses 45 years, and courses toward a degree 40 years. A

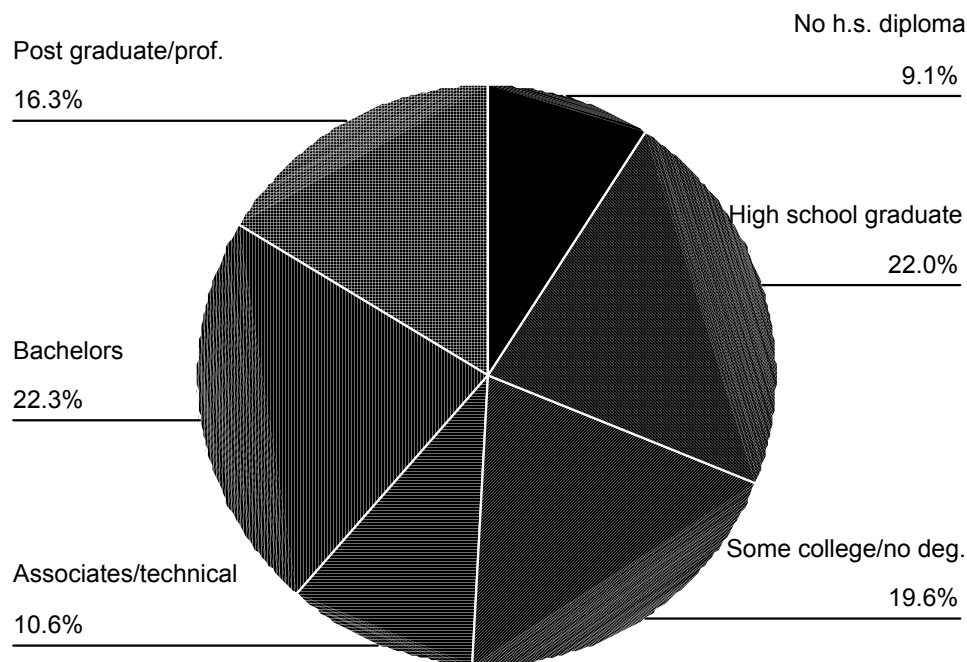
comparison of these average ages to those of Vermonters not interested in taking each kind of course is included in Appendix B.

Adult women in Vermont seem to be more interested than men in taking an online course. Of the females surveyed, 38.5% indicated they are interested in taking an online course compared to 32% of men ( $\chi^2=3.029$ ,  $*\leq .10$ ). More evidence is needed to support the existence of a relationship between gender and interest in taking non-credit, credit, and degree courses.

### *Vermonters' Educational Attainment and Continuing Education Interest*

There is a relationship between Vermonters' educational background and their interest in taking all four types of courses – non-credit, credit, online, and degree. Figure 1 indicates the current level of education of adult Vermonters.

**Figure 1. Current Level of Education of Adult Vermonters**



*Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont. 2003 Vermonters Poll. N= 668*

As indicated in Table 2, only 25% of adult Vermonters without a high school diploma are interested in taking courses towards a high school degree, and only 25% of those with a high school diploma or GED want to pursue formal higher education at this time. 45% of Vermonters with some college education and 30% of those with Associates or technical degrees or certification are interested in taking courses toward a degree. Over 50% of Vermonters with Bachelors or graduate/professional degrees are interested in taking non-credit courses.

**Table 2. Percentage of Vermonters of Different Education Levels Interested in Continuing their Education**

	No high school diploma N=61	HS Diploma/ GED N=147	Some College N=131	Associates/ Technical N=71	Bachelors N=149	Graduate/ Professional N=109	$\chi^2$
Non-credit	30	26	49	45	54	57	37.63***
Credit	26	26	47	37	46	36	21.43***
Online	27	27	42	33	41	37	10.70*
Degree	25	25	45	30	35	21	21.26***

*Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont. 2003 Vermonter Poll.*

### ***Vermonters' Household Circumstances and Continuing Education Interest***

There is a relationship between the number of children living in the household and interest in taking all four types of courses. Table 3 indicates the percentage of respondents living in households with no children, 1-2 children, and 3 or more children interested in continuing their education. High percentages of Vermonters living in households with three or more children are interested in taking courses, including 76% interested in taking non-credit courses.

**Table 3. Percentage of Vermonters Living in Households Without Children, With 1-2 Children, and With 3 or More Children Interested in Continuing their Education**

	No Children N=425	1-2 Children N=196	3 or More Children N=38	$\chi^2$
Non-credit	41	46	76	18.11***
Credit	30	48	60	28.36***
Online	30	43	57	16.92***
Degree	23	45	45	32.05***

*Source: Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont. 2003 Vermonter Poll.*

There does not seem to be a relationship between Vermonters' household income level and their interest in taking credit and degree courses. On the other hand, a relationship does appear to exist between household income and interest in both non-credit ( $\chi^2=9.29$  \*\*) and online courses ( $\chi^2=7.60$  \*). Table 4 indicates the percentage of Vermonters in each income level interested in continuing their education.

**Table 4. Percentage of Vermonters by Income Level who are Interested in Continuing their Education**

	Less than \$20,000	\$20,000 - \$50,000	\$50,000 - \$65,000	More than \$65,000
Non-credit	39	40	53	51
Credit	31	35	44	42
Online	26	35	44	42
Degree	28	31	35	30

*Source:* Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont. 2003 Vermonter Poll. N=600 (non-credit), 597 (credit), 601 (degree), and 595 (online).

There seems to exist a relationship between years lived in Vermont and interest in taking all four types of continuing education courses. Vermonters interested in taking non-credit courses averaged 28 years in Vermont compared to 37 years average of those not interested in taking non-credit courses ( $t=-5.68$  \*\*\*). The average years living in Vermont of adults interested and not interested in taking credit, online, and degree courses are similar to those cited for non-credit courses.

#### ***Vermonters' Region / Rural and Continuing Education Interest***

There does not seem to be a relationship between either region or rurality and the interest of Vermonters in taking non-credit courses. Nor does there seem to be a relationship between region and interest in taking online courses or rurality and interest in taking credit courses.

There is a relationship between Vermonters' region and interest in taking both credit ( $\chi^2=14.65$  \*\*) and degree (.007 significance level) courses. There also is a relationship between whether Vermonters live in rural, suburban, or urban areas and their interest in taking degree ( $\chi^2=4.95$  \*) and online ( $\chi^2=6.13$  \*\*) courses.

#### **Discussion**

This report is intended to inform Vermont's education providers including the University of Vermont Continuing Education group about the interest of various segments of the state's adults in non-credit, credit, online, and degree courses and programs. Considerations include:

- Non-credit courses in particular are of interest to relatively high percentages of older Vermonters; those who already have some college, 2-year, 4-year, and advanced degrees; Vermonters with household incomes greater than \$50,000; and Vermonters living in households with three or more children. Given the aging of the population and the preference of older Vermonters for noncredit programs, this represents a growth market. Additional research might be undertaken to learn more about the interest in noncredit courses of Vermonters with household incomes greater than \$50,000 and /or advanced college degrees.

- Adult women are more interested in taking an online course than adult men, and surprisingly, the average age of Vermonters interested in taking an online course is 45 years (higher than those interested in taking either credit or degree courses). Nationally, large numbers of older adults aged 55-75 own computers (Imel 1998). Also interesting are the results of this survey indicating that there may not be a difference in the interest in online courses between Vermonters living in different regions. Further research is needed using the town data gathered in the 2003 Vermonter Poll rather than the regional data to test this hypothesis further. In particular, data on Vermonters within driving distance to the Howard Dean Education Center in Springfield might be examined more closely to guide the program planning efforts of all of the partners co-located at the facility (high school, RVTTC, CCV, VTC, VIT, and UVM).
- There seems to be a market for degree programs around the state. As cited within this report, 35% of Vermonters with Bachelors degrees are interested in taking courses toward another degree. 45% of those with some college under their belt and 30% of those with an Associates or technical degree/certification also are interested in pursuing a degree. A 1998 survey of recent CCV associate degree graduates about their interest in pursuing a four-year degree can inform program planning (Marketreach 1998).
- 80% of learning by adults is informal (Tough 2002). Considerable research also exists about the differences in learning objectives of adult learners and younger students, and about the learning requirements of the new economy (Beller and Or 1998; Imel 2001). All of these have major implications for course and curriculum design, and given market demand, educational providers who don't recognize that e-learning is transforming the educational landscape will be left behind (Edelson and Pittman 2001).
- As much as this report enhances understanding of the demographics of formal adult learners in Vermont, it increases our awareness of the circumstances of Vermonters who are not interested in formal education at this time. What more might be done to help them to recognize that they must take responsibility for their own continued education and training if they are interested in improving their quality of life or making more money? Can Vermont companies, government agencies, and not-for-profit organizations do more to make their employees aware of tuition reimbursement policies and other benefits and services that support people in their acquisition of new skills and/or their study in fields of knowledge that may not have even existed when they were engaged in formal learning in high school and college? Can Vermont educational institutions do a better job of scheduling valuable courses and programs more conveniently and flexibly – and ensure that pedagogy is well suited for adult learners and e-learners?

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## Appendix A: 2003 Vermonter Poll questions related to continuing education of adult Vermonters

The University of Vermont's Continuing Education Division (CE) offers a variety of activities including workshops, programs, and courses on-campus, around the state, and on-line.

Have you participated in any Continuing Education activity in the past 2 years?

Are you interested in attending non-credit courses?

Are you interested in attending courses FOR credit?

Are you interested in attending courses towards a degree?

Are you interested in taking an online course?

*Limitations:* This report does not include discussion of the results associated with the first question. Many respondents were confused as to whether the question referred to continuing education offered by UVM or continuing education in general. The analysis is available from the author upon request.

## Appendix B: Additional Table

**Table B-1. Comparison of Average Ages of Vermonters Interested and Not Interested in Continuing Education Courses**

	Interested	Not Interested	$\chi^2$
Non-credit	47.6	51.2	-3.48 ***
Credit	41.1	55.1	-12.50 ***
Online	45.4	52.6	-5.83 ***
Degree	39.7	54.5	-12.56 ***

## Appendix C: Other Relevant Research

Atkin, C. (2000). *Lifelong Learning-Attitudes to Practice in the Rural Context*. International Journal of Lifelong Education 19, no. 3, 253-265.

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