Enough
Said

Young Women Talk About School, Work, and Becoming Adults: Why We Should Listen and What We Can Do

This report was researched and written by Vermont Works for Women with support from the Vermont Women’s Fund, the Serena Foundation, and Bari and Peter Dreissigacker, our strong partners in understanding and addressing the needs of women and girls.  May 2013
While Vermont should be proud of its high school graduation rate – at 91.4% the highest in the country – a number of signs indicate that we have more to do to ensure that the next generation is ready for college and/or work. This report considers how well we’re preparing young women, who are twice as likely to live in poverty as their male counterparts, to make informed, deliberate choices about education and work and to shoulder the financial responsibilities of adulthood. The unfortunate answer: not well enough.

This report argues that nurturing the full potential of Vermont’s native talent requires that we redouble our commitment to what young women told us they need: practical skills related to personal finance and living independently; allies who will provide support and advice; exposure to a broad range of careers and professional role models; and opportunities that challenge and stretch, through which they can both find, and lose, themselves.

As Governor Peter Shumlin indicated in his second inaugural address in January, 2013, the challenges of the new economy compel us to “embrace change in the way we both view and deliver education. The rapid change that is required of us is not optional; it will define our success or deliver our failure.” The recommendations in this paper aren’t all that’s required to build a vital Vermont economy but they are a critical part of the work; Vermont is too small, and too gray, to waste a single drop of talent.
The Issue

In his inaugural address on January 10, 2013, Governor Shumlin acknowledged that Vermont’s economy and its citizens fare well against national statistics related to unemployment and economic growth. But he stressed the importance of doing better.

“In 2011, Vermont was the only state in the Union where incomes actually rose after a decade of stagnation. But it’s not enough. The seventh lowest unemployment rate, when you are struggling to find a job, is not low enough. Four percent income growth is better than the rest of America, but for too many Vermonters who are working a job or multiple jobs and still struggling to pay their bills, it’s not enough. Enjoying one of the fastest economic growth rates in the Northeast is better than where we used to be, but for so many moms and dads like me who want their kids to live and prosper here at home, it’s not enough.” — Governor Peter Shumlin

Similarly, while Vermont youth do well against a number of national averages – high school dropout and teen birth rates, for example – a significant number of them still struggle to negotiate a path to financial independence. Some have cautioned that the State’s high school graduation rate doesn’t mean that all of Vermont’s graduates are ready for work or college. Their concerns include: an increase in the number of students entering college who reportedly require remedial courses in English or math; the fact that only 24% of those who graduate from high school earn a four-year degree within six years; and a 50% increase over the last decade in the rate of 16-20 year-old Vermonters who are neither in school nor working (for those between 20 and 24 years old the rate increased by over 70%).

Our Research

This report considers how well we are preparing young women to make informed, deliberate choices about education and work, and to shoulder the financial responsibilities of young adulthood. It reflects the experiences of 71 girls and young women, ages 15-25, from 28 towns who joined us in one of nine listening sessions last year. The majority came from families of limited financial means. The participants were varied in their connection to school or extracurricular activities.

To ensure that we reached participants of varied ages, educational levels, and experience, we held sessions at high schools, teen centers, youth-serving nonprofits, and at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility. The report is further informed by surveys completed by 143 girls, ages 14-20, who attended Vermont Works for Women’s annual Women Can Do Conference in October, 2012. Our report is grounded in what current research affirms about the needs of this age group and draws upon what is generally considered to be best practice in meeting these needs.

The fact that this paper focuses on young women should not be interpreted to suggest that young men do not face many of the same challenges. Beyond reflecting Vermont Works for Women’s particular expertise, or the
interests of the Vermont Women’s Fund and the Serena Foundation which supported this work, this report’s particular focus on older girls and young women also reflects the stark economic reality that women, regardless of age and educational levels, are nearly twice as likely as men to live in poverty. Nearly one in two female high school dropouts in Vermont will be persistently unemployed as adults, compared to only one in four males. The choices that young women make — in academic courses, in exploring career options, in pursuing higher education — almost certainly determine their future earning potential.

Unfulfilled Potential

These statistics, and those that the Governor shared in his inaugural address, reflect underdeveloped individual promise. As the Governor also suggested, they threaten the State’s economic health. The concern isn’t new. In 2006, two reports recommended swift action to combat the impact of a rapidly aging workforce by developing young talent: one released by the State’s Next Generation Commission, the other released by the Vermont Business Roundtable. “Approximately 27 percent of the high school graduating class of 2005 did not plan to pursue postsecondary education or training within six months of graduation,” warned the Next Generation report. “These young adults are the most likely members of their graduating class to stay in Vermont. They are also among the citizens most likely to be unemployed or underemployed later in life and in need of additional training as older adults.” The long-term costs can be considerable: according to a 2012 Civic Enterprises study, for every 16-year-old out of school and work, the future lifetime taxpayer burden is $258,040.

The overwhelming majority of the young women with whom we spoke felt under-prepared to make many of the decisions to function as adults: the ability to build a budget, buy a car, or fill out a tax return. Many expressed feeling unsupported by adults or peers in making choices, big and small, that would shape their young adult years. They were unclear about their options and vague in describing their interests.

Nurturing the full potential of Vermont’s native talent requires that we redouble our commitment to what we know young people need: practical skills related to personal finance and living independently; allies who can provide support and advice; exposure to a broad range of careers and professional role models; and opportunities that immerse and challenge, tap into passion and talent.

We are right to focus a part of our current conversation about education on developing STEM skills. But Vermont needs more than engineers. It needs individuals who think expansively, solve problems, are comfortable with ambiguity and can work collaboratively. It needs a workforce that has learned to be persistent in the face of failure and flexible in the wake of change.

The creative forces that underpin a robust economy — entrepreneurial innovation, scientific discovery, a willingness to take risks — are fueled by emotional engagement, the freedom and support to experiment and fail, and a clear sense of purpose. Establishing an environment that values and nurtures these qualities and that is responsive to gender must be among our highest priorities. This is the responsibility, not only of schools, and not only of parents, but also of us all.
1. ILL-EQUIPPED TO MANAGE WORK & MONEY

The overwhelming majority of young women with whom we spoke expressed feeling ill-equipped for the tasks of adulthood – writing a cover letter and resume, researching careers, making a budget and living within it, opening a bank account and balancing a checkbook, shopping for groceries, buying a car and renting an apartment, filling out tax or financial aid forms. Indeed, there is widespread agreement that we are graduating young people who are unprepared to tackle even the most basic tasks required of adulthood. “Learning experiences during the high school years have to help young people plan and prepare for the future, as fluid and shifting as that future may be...,” asserts a recent report published by the Nellie Mae Foundation. “Yet, although these tasks are crucial for young people, they have received only modest attention from institutions that work with youth. That has left young people too much on their own, without the guidance, information, and preparatory experiences to underpin good decisions.”

While the vast majority of parents and teachers agree that students should graduate high school having learned something about personal finance, young people too often learn these things much later, and only when they become immediately relevant. “There are just a lot of paperwork things I didn’t even realize I didn’t know,” commented one high school senior in Barre. “I filed for taxes for the first time this year, and I didn’t understand it at all. I don’t even know how to write a check.”

Students expressed anxiousness about how much money they’d need to cover expenses and ignorance about what jobs paid. Those we interviewed said they didn’t have a clue what kind of income they needed to bring home in order to have their own apartment, or buy food and necessities. They are not alone. Of the 1,200 young adults who completed a national survey conducted in 2009 by Charles Schwab, only 17% felt well-prepared to save wisely; 15% felt well-prepared to invest money wisely; and only 32% felt well-prepared to live within their means. In our Vermont Works for Women survey of 143 high school girls, we asked students what “economic independence” means to them and what they need in order to achieve self-sufficiency in the future.

While 57% gave answers that indicated an understanding of the concept of self-sufficiency, a full 43% responded in ways that demonstrated the opposite.

If we are falling short in our responsibilities to provide young people with the tools they need to budget, save, and navigate their financial lives, part of the reason lies in the fact that personal finance is not a subject tested under No Child Left Behind. Indeed, 26 states, including Vermont, have not adopted K-12 financial literacy requirements of any kind. Only four states require high school students to complete a course in personal finance to graduate. The lack of a deliberate approach to financial education mystified many of the young people with whom we spoke. “A lot of adults assume we know this stuff, that it’s common knowledge,” said a frustrated Montpelier teen. “It’s not.”

We were also told that financial literacy courses, if offered, were often marginalized in high school curricula, perceived either as “irrelevant” with respect to their immediate lives, or delivered too theoretically. Our participants advocated for a more experiential approach that
simulated the situations they would encounter in real life. They also advocated that such courses should address a broad range of choices and challenges they’ll soon encounter, including the process of looking for work. “I think regular school needs to prepare you more for getting a job,” mused a high school graduate from Brattleboro. “They say that school is preparing you, and they teach you the education part, but they don’t teach you about writing a resume or actually going out in the field.”

These students’ points were crystallized in the pointed question of one participant: “If health class is mandatory, why shouldn’t [a class in] other life skills be mandatory?”

At significant national cost, we marginalize this kind of practical education, assuming it to be the domain of parents or the responsibility of the student to learn on their own. “Although there is general consensus that Americans should have the opportunity to learn and exercise sound finance practices,” asserted the President’s Advisory Council on Financial Capability, “there are numerous indicators that many of us are not financially capable.” The experts, as well as the girls and young women with whom we spoke, are clear: we can and must do better.

### What Can We Do?

Clearly, we must do more to develop the capacity of young people to negotiate the practical challenges of young adulthood – particularly girls and women, who score lower on financial literacy tests at all age levels. To this end, we should:

**Better Equip Teachers** A survey conducted by the Center for Financial Literacy at Champlain College in Burlington, VT, indicated a dearth of professional development curricula for high school teachers in the practicalities of personal finance. We can address this need by further expanding opportunities for teacher training at the Center.

**Integrate financial literacy concepts throughout the K-12 curriculum.** The urgency of this issue has produced a number of terrific resources that connect educators and parents to financial education websites, discussions of related academic standards, and best practice. Vermont has teachers at every grade level who are weaving financial principles into the curriculum; their work should be highlighted and shared.

Whether offered as electives or as required courses, high school financial literacy classes should introduce high school students to the growth and earnings projections of different fields. They should demystify the tasks that clearly baffled the young women with whom we spoke: financial aid forms, resume writing, opening a checking account, buying a car. Classes should involve simulated or real opportunities to assess financial options, make financial choices, and evaluate the financial consequences.

**Bolster School Initiatives with Community Funding and Expertise** We cannot leave schools to shoulder this responsibility alone. Businesses and nonprofit organizations must be active partners in supporting teacher training, in lending their professional expertise to classrooms, and in reinforcing financial literacy principles in afterschool or summer programs.
2. ALLIES & SUPPORTIVE NETWORKS IN SHORT SUPPLY

None of us “makes it” without allies – peers, parents, teachers, mentors, and others who believe in our talent, inspire our best effort, from whom we can accept criticism and direction. Indeed, when asked about the factors most important to their future success, 60% of survey respondents identified “a supportive network of family and friends.” Judging by what we heard from those who attended our listening sessions and another conducted recently by the Vermont Commission on Women, such allies are too often in short supply.

Some who attended our listening sessions confided that while their parents might want to help, they often don’t know how or don’t have the time to provide consistent guidance. While some expressed having had a positive experience with their school’s guidance counselor, the majority felt that guidance counselors are often overwhelmed, busy, and only have time for either students with severe behavioral/emotional challenges or the high achievers. Those in the “middle,” they told us, especially those who are quiet or don’t advocate for themselves, can get lost in the mix. “The guidance counselor,” said one, “is not going to come looking for you; you have to seek him/her out.”

Adults aren’t the only allies upon whom young women stake their future success. Indeed, young women spoke emphatically about the need for support among female peers. Over and over again we heard about how “most of my friends are guys,” because “girls are just horrible to each other.” They reported gossip, bullying, judgment, backstabbing, holding grudges, name calling, competition over boys and looks, and harassment as rampant. Some articulated not feeling safe walking in the hallways at school because of the threats of violence from other young women. Many expressed feeling judged about what they wore, who they hung out with, their attitudes about school, or their choices about parenthood. Many participants appeared to be resigned to this female dynamic. “It never, ever, ever goes away,” said one 19-year-old Brattleboro participant. “It’s there forever. I mean, I see grown women in their 30s and 40s still doing it.”

“I get along better with guys...girls are just horrible to each other.” – High school student, Montpelier

“I might have worked harder or held onto my plans if my friends had supported me,” said a high school graduate from Burlington. “But setting goals and working hard would have meant risking my friendships. You can’t have dreams when you’re always worrying that every move will be judged.” Friendships with boys involved less drama, we were told, but it also often meant allowing the male friends to “take over and make decisions.”

By and large, participants told us they were left alone to resolve their differences by adults who didn’t know how to intervene – or didn’t appear to notice. “There were always so many kids for teachers to look after,” said one 25 year-old. “They didn’t have the time to say something about an unkind remark or find out why someone might be upset.” In the end, she said, “all those little things, all that meanness, takes a toll on how you think about yourself.”

All of those we convened at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility confided that many of the women with whom they had been closest had had a negative influence on their decision-making. The cost of this dynamic, particularly in a prison setting, is significant and stark. “I would really like to have more
relationships with women,” mused one inmate. “In this facility, if we came together, we could make changes...we don’t advocate for ourselves because we’re against each other.”

The “mean girl” dynamic, if not addressed early on, carries forward well into adulthood. Given the importance of peers in supporting or diminishing teen aspirations, the long-term negative impact can be significant, in juggling the myriad responsibilities of job and parenting, and in light of the fact that success in the twenty-first century workplace hinges in part upon one’s ability to collaborate with others.  

As adults we must not accept or dismiss unhealthy dynamics among girls and women as a natural female rite of passage; these dynamics persist either because our culture encourages them or because we have looked the other way. “We can’t just point the finger at the media for the things girls do to each other,” insists Rosalind Wiseman in Queen Bees and Wannabees.

“We also have to point to ourselves for not challenging the culture that creates these problems, and we must, as must our daughters. Girls will only reach their full potential if they’re taught to be the agents of their own social change. As we guide girls through adolescence, we have to acknowledge it, name it, and act to change (it)....”  

**What Can We Do?**

**✓ Challenge the Behavior** As adults, we must be vigilant in addressing behaviors that exclude, belittle, or bully. We must focus as much attention on the context of a conflict as we do on the individuals involved. And if our jobs involve us in working with girls or young women, we must better equip ourselves to recognize, defuse, and help girls move through conflict.

**✓ Foster Positive Peer Relationships** Girls and young women must be given more opportunities to work in single-sex groups on projects that require them to negotiate, collaborate, and problem-solve. Through these activities they are more likely to appreciate their respective strengths, value their differences, and forge social networks. The networks women develop – with friends, neighbors, relatives, or classmates – can be critical in supporting teen ambitions and in helping women juggle job, education, and childcare responsibilities. The ability to establish and maintain positive relationships is essential to success at work.

**✓ Reach Out as Allies and Role Models** As educators and parents we must consciously model and draw positive attention to successful female friendships and business collaborations. And as adult women we must make a point of reaching out to co-workers, friends, and particularly to the young in our midst to offer perspective, mentoring, and support. In the words of many young women we interviewed, our stories, our examples, “offer hope” and “new ideas about future possibilities.” Whether formally as part of a program or as something we simply do on our own, our support is a part of the solution.
3. LIMITED EXPOSURE TO WORK AND CAREER OPTIONS

The cultural and social context of family and community shape what young people learn about careers and influence their ultimate trajectories. All too often, especially in rural communities where there are fewer jobs and therefore fewer visible role models, the context within which Vermont youth grow up can serve to constrain ambition, rather than fuel it. This is particularly true for young women who grow up in poverty. “The social networks of women living in poverty tend to be smaller and more limited, strained, homogenous, and insular than those of their higher income counterparts,” notes a 2012 report by the Crittenden Women’s Union, a Boston-based nonprofit dedicated to breaking the cycle of poverty. “Since this type of social network is primarily comprised of others in similar socio-economic positions, it is not a likely source for career or educational opportunities.”

Deliberate and consistent exposure to role models, to higher education, and to a range of fields and career opportunities is essential if young people are to make informed decisions about school and work. Important, too, is information about careers that require post-secondary training but not a college diploma, given the high cost of most four-year degrees. Indeed, if only 20% of all young people graduate from high school fully prepared for academic college, as research suggests, 80% of high school graduates need to know about other legitimate options and career pathways.

Those in our listening sessions talked in exasperated terms about what adults assumed they already knew – about career paths and opportunities or about themselves. “There’s the tech center where you can get a taste of a trade and learn things that can help you in the future,” mused one participant in Brattleboro, “but it’s not like they are making you (try it) so enrolling has to come from your own self-awareness… it’s all on your own shoulders.” – Brattleboro participant

Indeed, how does one know she wants to be an auto mechanic if she hasn’t handled a socket wrench or crawled under a car? The obvious answer: exposure. In all of the listening sessions we conducted, participants talked about wanting to interact more with “real people, to hear their stories about what they do, and what they feel passionately about.”

How can we expect our children to make the most of their lives if we limit their points of reference to what they already know? Our children need to meet successful professionals who love what they do. Our children need to hear their stories, touch their tools and see where they work. We would argue that while important for all students, this experience is especially critical for girls.

VWW was founded by a carpenter who believed that the absence of women in her
field wasn’t due to lack of interest – it was because women didn’t imagine carpentry was an option. While secondary schools, colleges, and employers have taken steps over the past two decades to encourage women and girls to consider nontraditional fields, women accounted for over 95% of kindergarten teachers, librarians, dental assistants, and registered nurses in 2009. They composed less than 4% of all carpenters, and 1% of electricians or automotive technicians.

At the same time, women have been losing ground in fields where they had made previous inroads: women’s participation in civil engineering, for example, declined from 13% in 2005 to just over 7% in 2009. In 2008, women held only 25% of all professional IT-related jobs, an 11% drop from a high of 36% in 1991.

Workforce projections for 2018 show that nine of the ten fastest-growing occupations that require at least a bachelor’s degree will require significant scientific or mathematical training. Some of the largest increases will be in engineering- and computer-related fields — fields in which women are significantly under-represented.

Few of those we interviewed had pursued or participated in any type of technical education, even though every high school in Vermont is associated with at least one technical/career center. Those who had attended a tech center were concentrated in programs in which women were the majority (i.e. cosmetology, human and health services, dental assisting). Their choices reflect state tech center enrollment patterns where young women represent no more than 15% of students in automotive, engineering, natural resources, or construction trades programs.

Governor Shumlin has sounded the call for more engineers, computer scientists and programmers, and scientists. Given the size of our state, reason suggests that to meet demand in these fields many recruits will have to be women. But there’s an even greater economic imperative for women to be represented in these fields: a better profit margin. Several recent studies, including a 2004 Catalyst report, have demonstrated that companies in all industries with the greatest percentage of women in top management have financially outperformed companies at the other end of the spectrum.

Increasing the number of women entering and staying in the fields of science, math, technology, and engineering will require us to do more than hold open the door; it will demand deliberate, coordinated, and sustained effort on the part of parents, schools, and employers. It will require them to decide that focusing particular attention on girls isn’t discriminatory, but is sound economic practice.

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**What Can We Do?**

We must expose young people to a broad range of fields, tools, work environments, and professionals. This is especially true for girls if we want to encourage them to consider careers in science, math, the skilled trades, technology or engineering. To this end we can:

- **Reach Out as Professional Mentors** Each of us must reach out to the next generation in as many ways as we know how – as classroom speakers, as formal and informal mentors, by hosting visits at work, by hiring interns or providing summer jobs. Women in nontraditional fields have a particular responsibility to do this: their stories can open eyes; their passion can inspire; and their encouragement can fuel determination and hope.

- **Do More to Encourage Girls and Young Women to Pursue Nontraditional Fields** Vigorously support technical centers in their efforts to attract and retain students in nontraditional programs. Actively support or develop initiatives that expose girls at every grade level to nontraditional career options and role models. When promoting programs in traditionally male occupations, include images of women professionals.
4. SHORT ON EXPERIENCES THAT ENGAGE AND MOTIVATE

The majority of the young women we interviewed had held a job, most of them in retail or as waitresses, babysitters, or cleaners. Employment at this stage in life can provide valuable experience as well as a paycheck. Studies of effective career education stress the importance of connecting students to actual work. “(I)n the end, work itself is the strongest and most effective ‘program,’” asserts a recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation on youth and work. “A continuum of work experiences from the teen years onward…builds job readiness skills, knowledge and confidence. These encompass not just workplace and financial skills but also the broader ‘soft skills’ of taking responsibility and initiative, working in teams, focusing on problem-solving, and learning how to contribute.”

We wholeheartedly agree. But by itself, a job won’t necessarily advance a young person’s thinking about his or her career. This was clearly reflected in what we heard in our listening sessions. Participants found it very hard to talk about careers and education in anything but imprecise terms. Although they could list fields in which they were interested, or certifications or apprenticeships that seemed intriguing, few could say very much about why they were of interest. Most could not articulate what they ultimately wanted from a career. Overall, it was hard to keep the discussion focused on the topic.

We’ve tried to understand why these young women, who could be so articulate on many fronts, struggled with this part of the conversation. Their vagueness reflects more than lack of exposure. We believe also that it reflects limited experience in feeling what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who studies creativity and innovation, calls “flow” – moments in work or play in which “a person’s body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult or worthwhile.”

Ideally, our children will choose work that taps into both talent and passion, and connects them to more than a weekly paycheck. John Dewey argued that this is critical to human happiness. We would also argue that it is needed to ensure a state’s economic vitality. The creative forces that drive a robust economy are fueled by emotional engagement, an experience of autonomy, and what writer Daniel Pink calls “grit.”

Encouraging moments that engage should be our primary goal as educators and parents. They affirm our curiosity and give life to innovation. They embolden us to take risks that are at the heart of discovery. And by engaging our talent and interests, they inspire our best effort. And our best effort is what is demanded of our small and wonderful state in a competitive and mercurial economy.

What Can We Do?

We must offer young people multiple opportunities to experience “flow” and know what it feels like to be engaged in an activity that taps into personal talent and passion. In an economy that shifts as quickly as these words are written, our objective should not be that a child identify early with a particular career or
field, but that she experiences, at an almost metabolic level, the thrill of connection. We can encourage this by:

Seeking their Input
Young people thirst to participate in efforts where their participation matters. Kurt Hahn, one of the founders of outdoor experiential education, said:

“There are three ways of trying to win the young. There is persuasion, there is compulsion, and there is attraction. You can preach at them; that is a hook without a worm. You can say 'you must volunteer.' That is the devil. Or you can tell them, 'you are needed'. That hardly ever fails.”

We must create new ways to give teens and young adults a meaningful role in identifying or addressing school or community issues in which they have a stake and interest. We must find new ways for them to serve on committees or boards, participate in community-based philanthropy, or become involved in advocacy or public policy.

Celebrating Work as a Means of Self-Expression and a Source of Meaning
If we only talk about vocation in economic terms – anticipated salary and benefits, predicted growth industries, career trajectories – we shorthand its potential to provide also deep purpose and connection.

We must make a practice of exposing young people to the work and lives of individuals who love what they do. Meeting such people in person can inspire. Their stories, which are nearly always punctuated by periods of uncertainty or confusion, provide proof that careers take their shape over time, through perseverance and reflection.

The ultimate value of this report lies in its ability to prompt action. Some of the recommendations demand strategic investments in programming or changes in policy or priorities. Many cost nothing and require only our steady and firm resolve – as parents, teachers, policy makers, business leaders, community based organizations and neighbors – to nurture the potential in our midst.

The first step is for each of us to tell our own story about our work and interests, about the regrets or unanticipated joys that have punctuated our work lives. Our stories can prompt young women to think differently or to bolster their resolve when patience wears thin. Story telling is an act of communion; it can forge relationships that sustain our energies and leaven our perspective.

In the coming months, Vermont Works for Women and the Vermont Women’s Fund will launch an initiative we’re calling The 50% Solution. Women now provide almost 50% of the nation’s labor – and 36% of an average family’s income. Addressing women’s poverty isn’t just a women’s issue – it’s an economic one. Vermont will reach its full potential only when women and girls can live up to theirs.

To find out more about how you can be part of The 50% Solution, contact Tiffany Bluemle, VWW’s Executive Director, at 802.655.8900. Or send an email to us at tbluemle@vtworksforwomen.org.
ENDNOTES

1 Governor Peter Shumlin, Inaugural address, January 10, 2013.

2 Walsh, Molly, Vermont graduation rates are high but students may be lacking in basic academic skills, Burlington Free Press, April 29, 2012.


5 In addition, the statewide longitudinal (four-year) dropout rate was approximately 13 percent for the high school graduating class of 2005. Furthermore, approximately 67.5 percent of Vermont adults who are 25 or older do not have a bachelor’s degree. http://education.vermont.gov.


7 STEM is an abbreviation used to denote the fields of science, technology, engineering, and math.


9 Halpern, R., It takes a whole society: Opening up the learning landscape in the high school years. Quincy, MA: The Nellie Mae Education Foundation. February 2012.

10 Charles Schwab. Young Adults & Money Survey. 2009


13 The Center for Financial Literacy at Champlain College was founded to “increase financial literacy in classrooms across our nation, ensure college students graduate with the skills to make sound decisions about spending, credit and investments, and help adults navigate difficult financial situations.” For the past two years, it has offered a financial literacy training institute for middle and high school teachers from Vermont supervisory unions throughout the state.

14 One such website is maintained by Jump$tart (www.jumpstart.org).

15 Summary notes from the meeting. The Vermont Commission on Women conducted a listening session involving 84 community members, including young women in the age group of interest to this report, in Bennington on Wednesday, September 12th. Its purpose: to give Vermonters in the region an opportunity to speak about the challenges and conditions experienced by young women, and the systems that can provide them with support.

16 In writing about the skills needed for the 21st century economy, the Center for Public Education reports that employers “consistently rank collaboration on their list of ‘must have’ competencies...‘interpersonal skills’ that give one the power to interact effectively with others, including the ability to communicate effectively, both orally and in writing, who relate well to others and cooperate with them, to negotiate and manage conflicts, and to lead through persuasion.” (http://www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Learn-About/21st-Century).


18 Ferry, N., Factors Influencing Career Choices of Adolescents and Young Adults in Rural Pennsylvania. June 2006.


ENDNOTES continued

21 As defined by the US Department of Labor, nontraditional fields are those in which women compose less than 25% of the labor force.


27 Youth and Work: Restoring teen and young adult connections to opportunity, Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012.


30 http://www.wilderdom.com/Hahn.htm (Kurt Hahn published little of his writing; many of his quotes are taken from his speeches.)

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ABOUT THE LISTENING SESSIONS

In the spring and fall of 2012 Vermont Works for Women conducted nine Listening Sessions in Vermont with 71 young women, ages 15-25. The sessions had two goals:

1. To provide an opportunity for young women to voice their needs, concerns, hopes, and dreams as they relate to work, career exploration, and economic independence; and

2. To gather information about the supports and opportunities that young women are or are not receiving and to learn more about what young women need in order to move toward positive work experiences and economic independence.

In each location we partnered with a local, community-based agency that assisted us with recruitment and logistics and provided background and demographic information on session participants.

Listening Session Community Partners

Barre
- VT Works for Women’s Youth Advisory Council
- Brattleboro
  - Brattleboro Area Youth Services
Burlington
- The Lund Center
- Morrisville
  - Learning Together Program
Rutland
- Rutland Boys’ and Girls’ Club
St. Albans
- BFA St. Albans High School
St. Johnsbury
- Northeast Kingdom Youth Services
Montpelier
- Montpelier High School
So. Burlington
- Community High School of VT
  — Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility

Listening Session Design

Each Listening Session lasted approximately one hour and was facilitated by two Vermont Works for Women staff members. The Listening Sessions began with an explanation of the goals for the session and the creation of ground rules to be followed during the dialogue. The conversation was guided by a series of open-ended questions that were designed as a springboard for discussion. The conversations were recorded. Additionally, upon arrival, each participant completed a brief paper survey that asked for information about work and educational aspirations and demographic data prior to the start of the listening session.

Participants

A total of 71 young women attended these sessions, representing the following 28 towns:

- Barre / Graniteville
- Hardwick / East Hardwick
- Bakersfield
- Watsonville
- Hyde Park
- Edison Mills
- Johnson
- Milton
- Underhill
- St. Albans
- Waterville
- BFA St. Albans High School
- Milton
- Underhill
- St. Albans
- Waterville
- BFA St. Albans High School
- Middlebury
- Montpelier
- Braintree
- Bennington
- West Dover
- Brookline
- Rutland / Fair Haven
- Montpelier
- Braintree
- Bennington
- West Dover
- Brookline
- Rutland / Fair Haven
- Montpelier
- Braintree
- Bennington
- West Dover
- Brookline
- Rutland / Fair Haven
Seventy-two percent of participants were between the ages of 15 and 18. The other 28 percent were between the ages of 19 and 25. Sixty-three identified as white/Caucasian; eight identified as of-color. Nearly all participants came from families of limited financial means. Many identified themselves as having experienced a variety of risk factors, including homelessness, poverty, early parenthood, a criminal record, and/or a history of trauma/abuse.

**Their educational status varied:**

**As did their living situations:**

- Who are the people that support you?
- What does your school do well to support you?
- Who do you talk to about your plans for the future?
- Who helps you/how do you plan and prepare for your future?
- We recently surveyed 143 girls/young women in VT, asking them the most critical element in helping them explore future career options during high school as well as after graduation. They said job skills and training, a supportive network of family and friends, and internships and apprenticeships. Do you agree or not?
- What kinds of internships and apprenticeships could be helpful to you in determining a future career/pathway?
- We asked a question about how hopeful people feel about their future in our opening survey. We noticed that between the ages of 18 and 19, the levels of hopefulness decrease significantly. Why might this be so?
- How would you approach investigating a new and unfamiliar work/career/career possibility?
- If you, for example, want to pursue a future job/career in cooking, law enforcement,
physical therapy, environmental science, etc., are you clear about the next steps you need to take to explore those potential areas?

- Have you ever considered being an entrepreneur and starting your own business? Why or why not?

Some of the above questions were re-framed for women housed at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility to reflect the realities of their circumstances, and also included:

- Could an adult female mentor be helpful and valuable to you?

- If you already have an adult female mentor, what has been valuable (and not so valuable) about this relationship?

- When you leave CRCF, do you know how to proceed in building a healthy network of friends/supporters?

VERMONT WORKS FOR WOMEN

Since 1987, Vermont Works for Women has offered opportunities for women and girls to discern their potential and explore their interests; to build confidence through mentoring, coaching, and embracing new challenges; to develop skills through hands-on training; and to navigate the often difficult transition home from prison. Each year, our programs enroll close to 1,000 women and girls, ages 11-60, from diverse backgrounds, living in Vermont communities. State and national organizations – among them the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the National Transitional Jobs Network, KeyBank, the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board, The Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce and the John Merck Fund – have recognized VWW as a leader in innovative program development. Four programs have been featured in national publications; two have been replicated in other states.

Please join us. Together, we can make Vermont Work for all Women!

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Phone: 802.655.8900 • Toll Free: 800.639.1472

www.vtworksforwomen.org

Building Confidence • Teaching Skills • Changing Lives