

Spring 2010

# Reaching Out

A newsletter from VSAC's Educational Opportunity Center

## Choosing his own path: Travis Orr

Travis Orr is an agent of change. His primary goals at the University of New Haven (UNH), in Connecticut, are to change his prospects in life, to use his education to launch a career that will be about more than financial stability (although for Travis, that would be a change in itself), and to enter a field he is passionate about.

In pursuit of these goals, the Barre, Vermont, native has already changed the world around him. Because of him, UNH has modified some of its dormitory and campus amenities to make them hospitable to students with disabilities. Travis also receives 28.5 hours a week of subsidized personal assistance through the Self-Directed Care program, administrated in Vermont by the Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living. "That was groundbreaking," he says, "because they'd never had a student receive these services out of state."

Travis, 25, has cerebral palsy, but his afflictions do not extend to his ambitions — he will graduate in 2010 with a business-related BA in music and a BS in sports management. Reflecting on VSAC's Vermont Scholarship Fund, which helped make it possible for

him to continue his education after high school, Travis says, "They're helping all of us. Scholarships and grants have put me in a position to be successful in a way I want to be, not in a way that financial conditions would have dictated."

Left to those conditions, Travis' story would have been different. Travis was an only child in a single-parent household, and he recalls, "It was always bill-to-bill. We never had the ability to save; but it was a good life, with a good family," which included his self-educated grandparents, whom he considers his mentors.

In terms of college financing, Travis encountered some challenges after graduating from Spaulding High School in 2002.

He was accepted to UNH, but had difficulty managing his financial aid package and thus had to leave after his freshman year.

Travis began working with his Educational Opportunity Center counselor, Andrea Gould, in 2003. They met many times to complete financial aid paperwork and to make plans for his college success. Through VSAC, he was able to arrange a workable combination of resources and return to school.

Upon graduation, Travis will have spent six years in college, and he anticipates a sizeable debt. However, the alternative would have been to let conditions dictate his future. That's just not Travis Orr's style.



# Choosing an online institution

Choosing the right online institution requires thought, careful planning, and answers to some very important questions.

## 1. Do you have a clear goal?

Having a precise goal will help you identify the courses and program you're looking for.

## 2. Has your research been thorough?

Check with local colleges and universities to see if they have online courses or programs. Community colleges often offer online courses at a much lower cost than some of the high-profile colleges and universities that advertise on television.

## 3. Does the institution have regional accreditation?

Regional accreditation is crucial because it communicates to the public that an institution has met accepted standards. Accreditation is a way of assuring prospective students that the courses and programs offered at the institution are of high quality and value. Accreditation for a school also means that its students are usually eligible for federal student aid.

## 4. Can you transfer credits?

Students who attend regionally accredited universities can frequently transfer course credits to other regionally accredited institutions. This may be important if you want to change schools or go into a different program.

## Check out:

- [www.OEDb.org](http://www.OEDb.org), an online database with reviews of 1,041 programs from 88 accredited online colleges; includes 2009 online college rankings.
- [www.geteducted.com](http://www.geteducted.com), an online counseling center for adults; evaluates, screens, filters, and analyzes colleges and schools that offer online education.

## Start strong!

- Sign up for courses before the start dates, for time to download required software or buy books.
- Check out the online course sites before courses begin. Read preliminary notes and instructions, try the software, e-mail the instructor, and introduce yourself in the discussion area.

## Don't forget!

- Check to make certain that the instructor has experience or expertise in the course subject.
- Review the course content to see if it covers the material you're expecting to learn.

## 5. What is the cost of tuition and fees? What other expenses can you expect?

Look into all available funding options. For help, talk with one of VSAC's Adult Outreach counselors. Call 655-9602 (Burlington area), 786-8840 (Rutland area), or 800-642-3177 (statewide) and ask for Outreach.

## 6. How will the university or college support you throughout your program? Is technical support reliable and available?

You should expect quality academic advising, technical support, administrative assistance, and access to faculty. Contact the online institution by e-mail or phone. Before you begin your courses, make sure someone will be available to answer all your questions. Find out if tech support is available 24/7 or during limited hours only. Make sure you take into account the time difference if your online institution is in a different part of the country.

## 7. What computer equipment and Internet access will you need?

Make certain you have a professional-sounding e-mail account. In addition, you're likely to need high-speed Internet access. Contact your local service provider and also look into satellite providers in order to compare costs. If you're not comfortable using the Internet, spend time practicing and becoming familiar with different search tools. Don't be afraid to ask for help from friends or relatives.

## 8. What software is required for the courses you want to take? Are you comfortable using the required software?

Required software may include a spreadsheet or database program for accounting or science courses, a photo manipulation program for design courses, or a slide-show program for presentations. In addition, the school may have software of its own that's required.

## 9. What are admission requirements or pre-requisites for any courses you want to take?

A prerequisite is a specific course that must be completed successfully before a more difficult course can be taken. By planning your courses carefully, you'll be able to minimize the amount of time it will take you to complete your program.

These are the people whose friendly voices you'll hear when you call for an appointment with an EOC counselor.



## VSAC's free online tools

### Use **VT Guidance Central** for:

- a résumé builder that helps you choose the right résumé format for your needs; also guides you through the process of creating an outstanding résumé that you can download, print, or save
- a cover-letter creator that provides four model cover letters to choose from and then helps you correctly format your letter with vital information
- a thank-you letter builder that helps you build a model letter that you can e-mail or print out and mail
- job interview practice that enables you to rehearse your answers to all kinds of interview questions, including commonly asked questions and job-specific questions
- several career exploration tools that help you explore and match your interests and values to related careers and education programs

### To use **VT Guidance Central**:

1. Go to [www.vvac.org](http://www.vvac.org) and click on the VT Guidance Central link in the Quick Links box.
2. Under "Adults," click on "Enter VT Guidance Central Program."
3. Click on "Choices Planner."
4. Click on the blue "Work" tab at the top of the screen.
5. Under "Getting Ready to Work," pick the tool you'd like to use.

### Use **LearningExpress** to learn how to:

- prepare for a job search
- conduct an effective job search
- improve networking skills
- achieve success on the job
- create a great résumé
- create great cover letters
- find interview tips to get the job you want
- use the Internet for job hunting

Each lesson provides detailed information and multiple practice opportunities. By the end of the lessons on résumés and cover letters, you'll have documents that you can download, save, and e-mail to employers. LearningExpress also offers lessons on:

- GED test preparation
- writing, reading, and math skills improvement
- test prep for many standardized job tests, including tests for border patrol placement, nursing assistants, corrections officers, and cosmetologists

### To use **LearningExpress**:

1. Go to [www.vvac.org](http://www.vvac.org).
2. Click on the LearningExpress link in the Quick Links box.
3. Use VSAC's account number 10254 for free access.

## TRiO history

“TRiO” refers to a set of federal programs authorized by Congress and overseen by the U.S. Department of Education. Funding is granted to educational institutions or nonprofit organizations like VSAC, which submit competitive proposals for grant money to provide support and enrichment to eligible students.

TRiO programs were established through the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 as part of the War on Poverty initiated by President Lyndon Johnson (providing federal financial aid for students with need was also part of this Act). The term “TRiO” referred to the original three programs:

- 1. Upward Bound (UB)**, which was designed to help high school students strengthen their academic preparation for college. Here in Vermont, there are UB programs at Castleton, Johnson, and Lyndon state colleges, Southern Vermont College, and University of Vermont (UVM).
- 2. Talent Search**, another college-access program for high school students, established in 1965. VSAC has sponsored the statewide Talent Search program since 1969.
- 3. Student Support Services (SSS)**, which was added in 1968 to help eligible college students improve their success in and graduation from college. The same colleges that host UB programs also have SSS programs, as does the Community College of Vermont (CCV).



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### **Educational Opportunity Center**

(EOC) programs, like the one VSAC has hosted since 1991, were added to TRiO in 1972 to provide adults with college-access services, including help with career exploration, college selection, college financing, and financial aid applications. VSAC’s EOC program is one of 124 similar programs throughout the country today. The Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program was added to TRiO in 1986 and was launched at UVM in 2003. McNair programs, designed for eligible college students with strong academic potential, help participants prepare for doctoral studies.

The common element in all TRiO programs is either eligibility criteria

or the particular student population targeted for service. The majority of students served must be from families in which neither parent has graduated from a four-year college, and families that have modest incomes, meaning they’ll likely need financial aid to pay for college. SSS programs can also serve students with documented learning disabilities.

All of these programs are designed to increase student motivation, improve academic success, and assist students as they climb the education ladder from middle school to graduate school. There’s no limit to the places you can go with the support you receive by participating in a TRiO program.

## VSAC resources for students of all ages

At VSAC, you’ll find the resources you need and the experts to help you use them. VSAC is a public, nonprofit organization established in 1965 by the VT Legislature to ensure that all Vermonters have the financial and information resources to pursue education or training beyond high school.

### **Use the VSAC Resource Center.**

If you have easy access to the Winooski area, use the VSAC Resource Center for expert guidance on career exploration, college planning, and paying for college. Speak with an advisor, attend a workshop, or borrow from our lending library of more than 8,200 books, DVDs, CDs, and other resources on careers, education, financial aid, and professional and personal development.

### **Use the online catalog at [www.vvac.org](http://www.vvac.org).**

If you live in a different part of the state or can’t visit the center, search the VSAC library catalog

online at [www.vvac.org](http://www.vvac.org) to arrange for an interlibrary loan at your local library. No travel necessary!

### **Make an appointment with one of our Adult Outreach counselors, available statewide to help you.**

Want to think about going back to school? Worried your income makes college impossible? Are you the first generation in your family to go to college?

Let VSAC’s Adult Outreach program help you. Individual appointments and workshops are free, confidential, and available statewide. Call **800-642-3177** and ask for Outreach.