



# The Intersection of Work and Learning

Findings From Entering Students  
in Community Colleges



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“You can’t work your way through college anymore. Colleges need to do a better job of providing the right support services to ensure their working students have the means to reach graduation and gainful employment.”\*

Anthony P. Carnevale, *Director*,  
Georgetown University Center on  
Education and the Workforce

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## Acknowledgments

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Finally, the Center commends the community college students across the country who work and attend college simultaneously in order to make better lives for themselves and their families.

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The Center for Community College Student Engagement, a service and research initiative in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin, provides insights that matter for community colleges. The Center assists institutions and policymakers in using information to promote improvements in student learning, persistence, and attainment.

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\*Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. (2018, August 28). Working low-income college students are less likely to attain a bachelor’s degree than their higher-income peers, finds new Georgetown University research [Press release]. Retrieved from [https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Low-Income-Working-Learners-Press-Release\\_final.pdf](https://1gyhoq479ufd3yna29x7ubjn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/Low-Income-Working-Learners-Press-Release_final.pdf)

# Can Work and Learning Successfully Coexist?

The majority of community college students work while attending college, and many work because their financial situations dictate that they do so. In fact, 29% (N=341,825) of 2019 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) cohort respondents report working for pay more than 30 hours per week. Yet, working and attending college concurrently can be a struggle for students: Sixty percent (N=338,015) of 2019 CCSSE cohort respondents report that working full-time is an issue that could cause them to withdraw from college and 67% (N=336,193) of 2019 CCSSE cohort respondents say a lack of finances could cause them to withdraw from college.

The Center explored the intersection of entering students' working lives and academic lives with a special-focus module that was added to the 2019 administration of the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE), which asks students about their experiences from the time they decide to enroll in college through the end of the third week of the fall term. While entering or first-term students are less likely to work than students beyond their first term, it's worth noting that a majority of students are employed when they begin attending college. In fact, the results of the special-focus module show that 69% (N=21,476) of entering students work for pay.

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The Center holds as a core organizational principle that higher levels of engagement are related to higher levels of student success.

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Among the most important takeaways from the analysis of the responses to the module is that when faculty and staff talk with entering students about their work and help them find balance between their working lives and their academic lives, they are helping those students onto a path of being more successful.

## Respondents

- » The Working Learner special-focus module was administered in fall 2019 to 24,643 entering students at 74 colleges. Of these respondents, 21,476 students consistently indicated working for pay or not working for pay across several of the module items. For more information about the methodology used in this report, visit <https://cccse.org/pubs/WorkingLearnerMethodology.pdf>.
- » All data in subsequent sections of the report are limited to only SENSE respondents who consistently indicated working for pay (N=14,759).

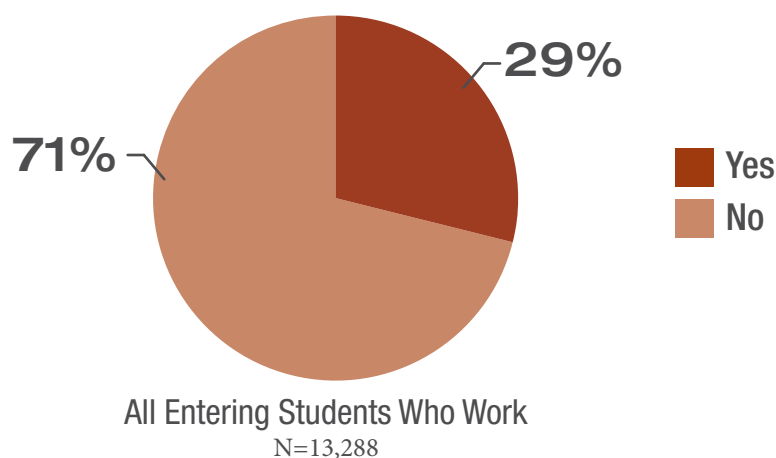


# What We Know About Entering Students Who Work

## How much do entering students work?

Eighty-five percent of entering students who work for pay only have one job, but 15% (N=13,042) have at least two jobs. More striking is that nearly a third (29%) of entering students who work for pay work over 40 hours per week.

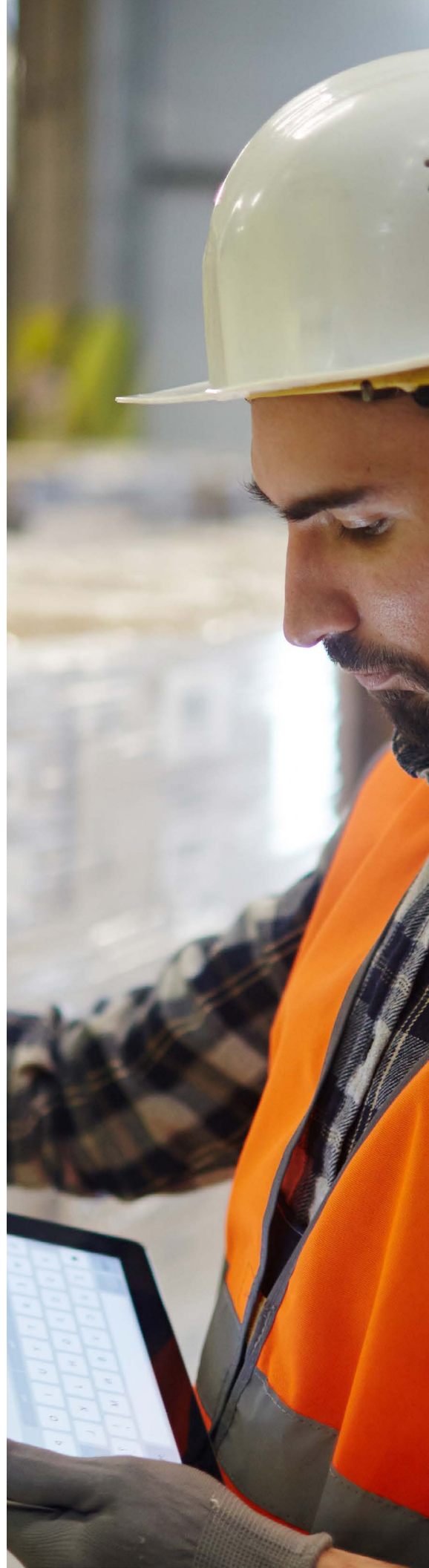
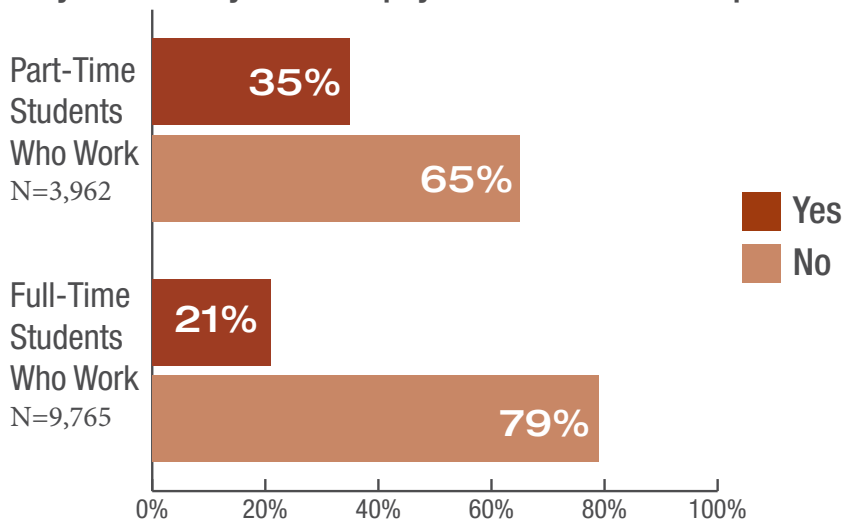
Do you currently work for pay more than 40 hours per week?



## Which entering students work the most?

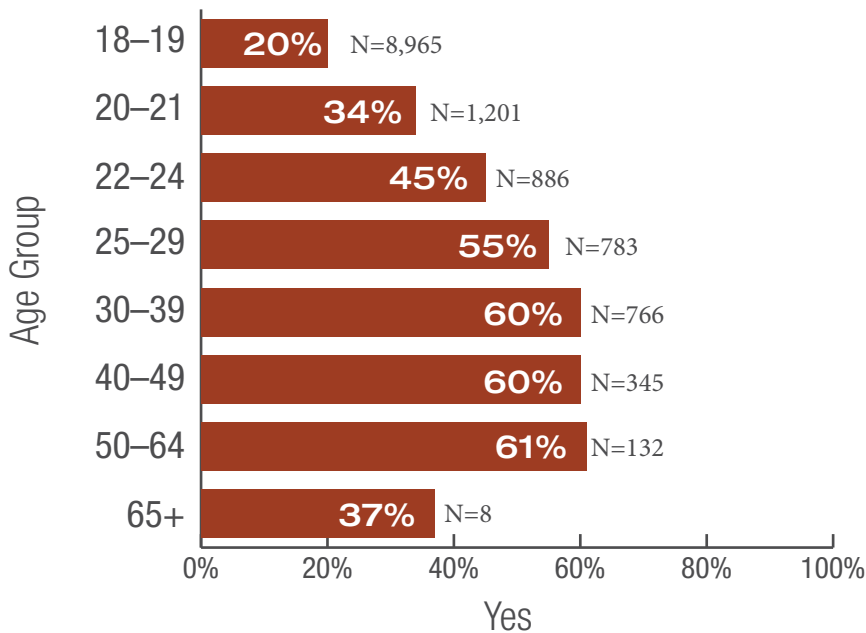
Part-time entering students are more likely to work over 40 hours per week than are full-time students. Furthermore, 62% (N=3,965) of part-time students also say that working determines how they are enrolled. Only 28% (N=9,770) of full-time students say this.

Do you currently work for pay more than 40 hours per week?



Older entering students are much more likely to work over 40 hours per week than younger students.

### Do you currently work for pay more than 40 hours per week?



## Questions for Consideration

- » In what ways is your college designed to serve students who work full-time or more?
- » How does your college talk to students who work full-time and attend school part-time about the costs associated with the longer amount of time needed to reach their goals?
- » If part-time students and older students work more than other students, what types of additional supports and services might they need to ensure they have an equitable experience?
- » What types of financial literacy courses or trainings does your college offer students?



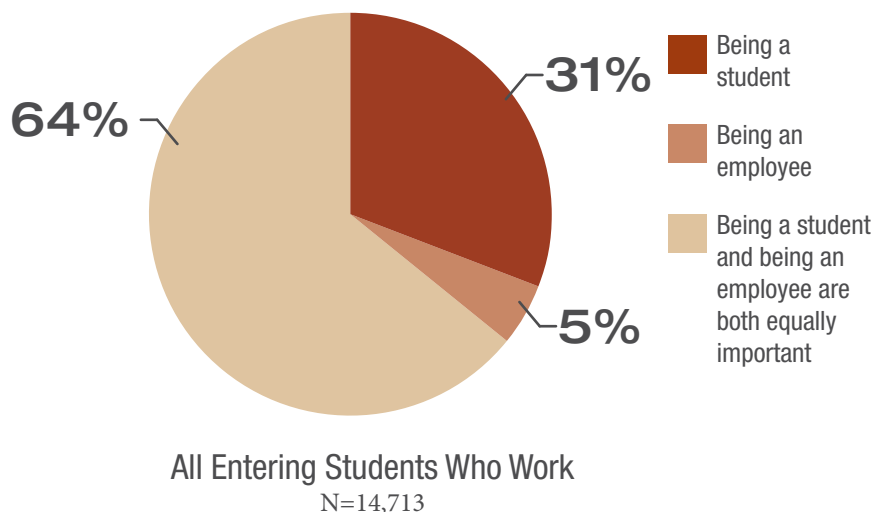
## What is more important to entering students: work or learning?

While very few entering students who work say being an employee is more important than being a student, nearly two-thirds of respondents view working and being a student as equally important. Even though younger students are less likely to work as much as older students, 60% (N=9,988) of those aged 18–19 also view working and being a student as equally important. Not surprisingly, entering students who are enrolled full-time are more likely to view being a student as more important than being an employee, in comparison with their part-time counterparts.

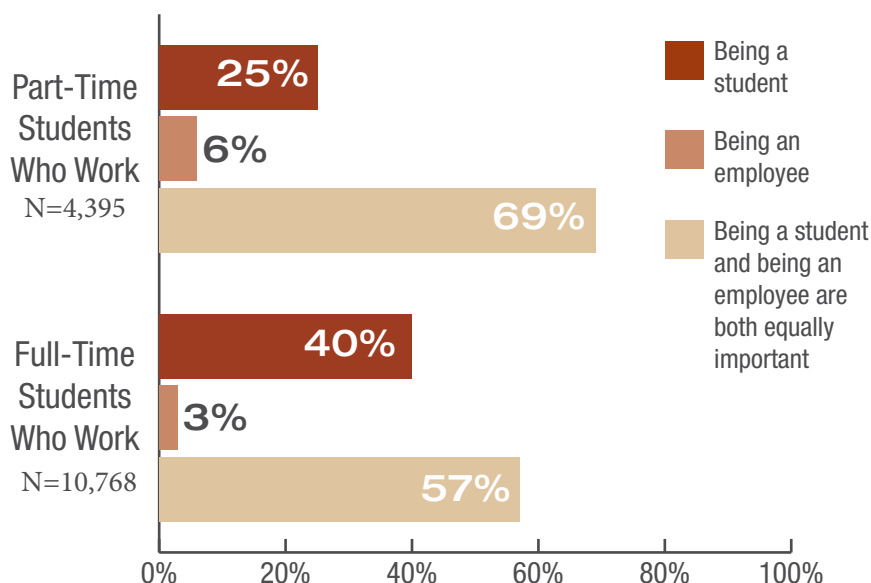
As many community college students are working to make ends meet, it stands to reason that the majority of respondents view being an employee as equally important as being a student. Institutions undertaking guided pathways reform efforts help students explore career interests early in their academic journeys so that they have a clear idea of where they are headed—including detailed information about jobs and salaries—and exactly what they have to do to get there. This type of engagement and planning provides students with a roadmap for success.

Some students may even be able to find jobs while they are in college related to their career goals, which would likely strengthen the connection between being a student and being an employee and augment the importance of their studies. But even when this is not the case—and it isn't for the majority of students—the data suggest there is value in talking with students about not only the work they want to do in the future, but also the work they are currently doing.

Currently, which is most important to you?



Currently, which is most important to you?



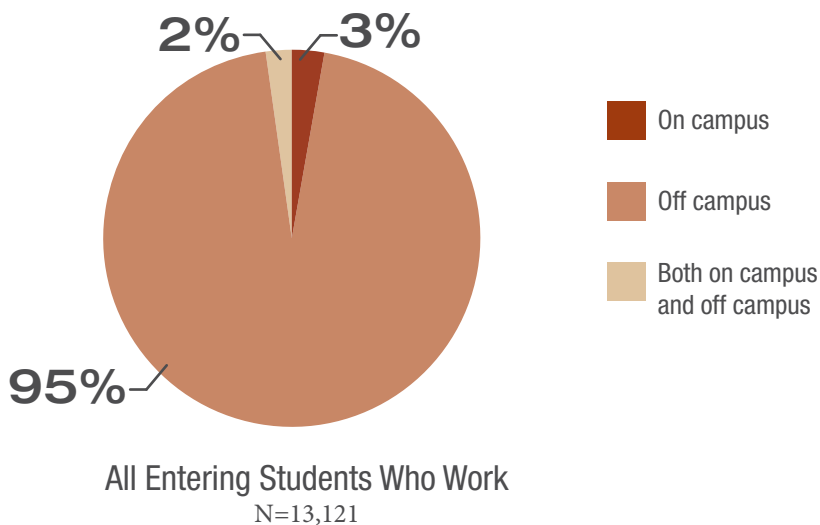
## Questions for Consideration

- » How do students at your college develop a plan and pathway for achieving their goals?
- » What kinds of career exploration does your college offer students?
- » How do students at your college become aware of the types of jobs and corresponding salaries to which their program areas will lead?
- » How do those who lead career exploration at your college talk to students about their current jobs and the soft skills and transferable skills they are gaining through them?
- » What career counseling services does your college offer that connect students with jobs within their program areas, both while they are in college and after they graduate?

### When work is connected to learning

Very few entering students who work are employed in paying jobs on campus, but when students perform this kind of work, they are more engaged than students who work off campus. This is not a surprising finding given that students who work on campus likely don't encounter the same type of disconnect as students who view their academic lives and their working lives as two separate entities. Instead, for students working on campus, a connection to campus—and the associated supports that being on campus brings—is built into their jobs.

Do you currently work for pay on campus and/or off campus?

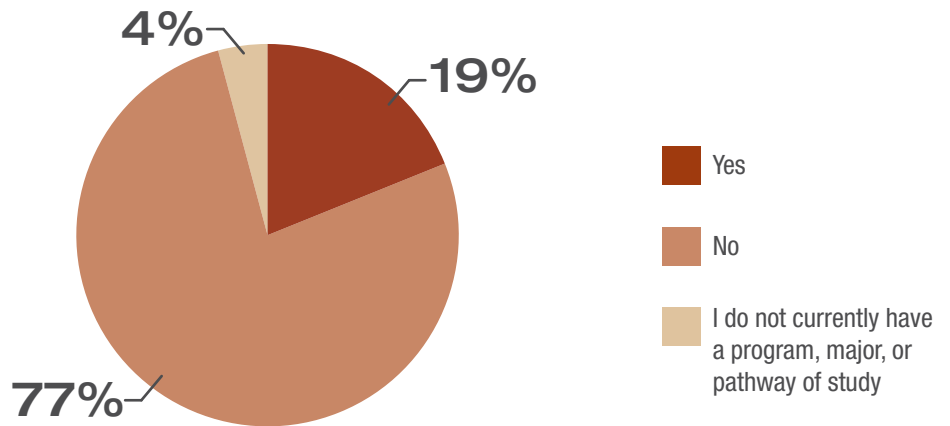




About one in five entering students who work report being employed in the same field as their program, major, or pathway of study—suggesting that they have already chosen a career path and/or are possibly returning to college to advance in their career. In fact, over 40% (N=1,114) of entering students aged 30–49 who work for pay are doing so in the same field as their program, major, or pathway of study.

Students already working in the same field as their program area will likely have an idea of the goal they are working toward and may intrinsically feel a stronger connection between their work and learning. However, college-guided career exploration may also encourage some of these students to raise their aspirations by pursuing opportunities they might not have considered otherwise.

**Are you currently working for pay in the same field as your program, major, or pathway of study?**



All Entering Students Who Work  
N=13,297

## Questions for Consideration

- » How is your college utilizing available opportunities to support more students in working on campus?
- » If your college is in the process of implementing guided pathways, how can you capitalize on the experience of students who are already working in the same field as their program area?
- » How does your college connect students with local employers for internships and other applied learning experiences?
- » Do all students at your college participate in career exploration, even those already working in the field of their program area?



# How Colleges Can Help Students Who Work

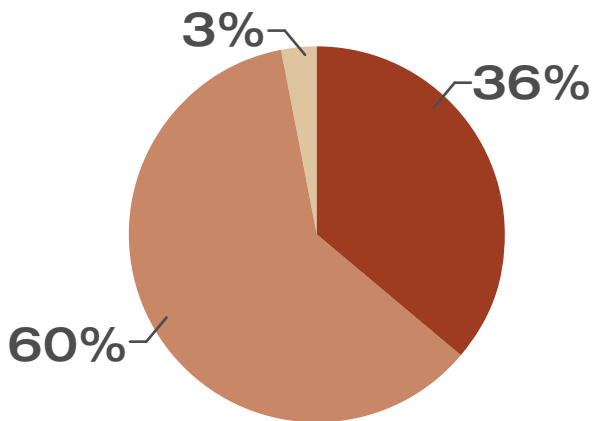
## Policy and practice affect working students

Over a third of entering students who work report that working makes it difficult for them to take the courses they need. Furthermore, over half of all working students between the ages of 22 and 49 report difficulty with this.

Additionally, half of all entering students who work report having some difficulty scheduling their classes due to their work schedule.

Students who report not having these kinds of difficulties are more engaged than students who do face these challenges. Since entering students who work are less engaged when they face challenges with course scheduling and course offerings, colleges may want to consider how they can make adjustments to these areas of policy and practice to meet more working students' needs.

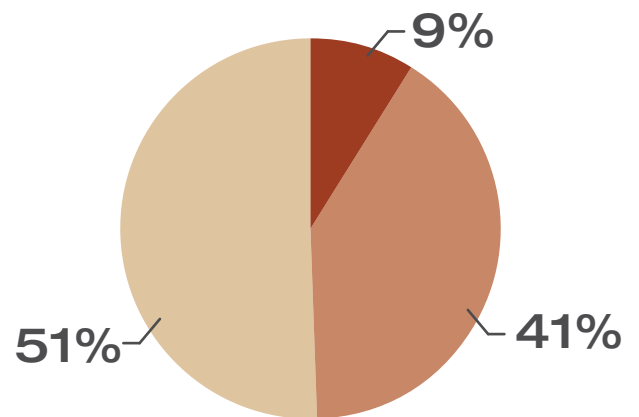
Does working for pay make it difficult for you to take the courses you need for your program, major, or pathway of study at this college?



All Entering Students Who Work  
N=13,306

Yes No I do not currently have a program, major, or pathway of study

When thinking about your work schedule this academic term, how difficult was it to schedule your classes at this college?



All Entering Students Who Work  
N=13,354

Very difficult Somewhat difficult Not at all difficult

Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Questions for Consideration

- » In what ways is your college structured to meet the needs of students who work?
- » How does your college consider students who work in matters of policy and practice, such as scheduling and course offerings?

## Deeper relationships matter

The Center has long affirmed, through survey data and focus groups, that when students form relationships with others on campus, they will be more engaged in their studies and more likely to succeed.

Correspondingly, the special-focus module findings indicate that there is a positive benefit to instructors and staff taking an interest in their students' working lives.

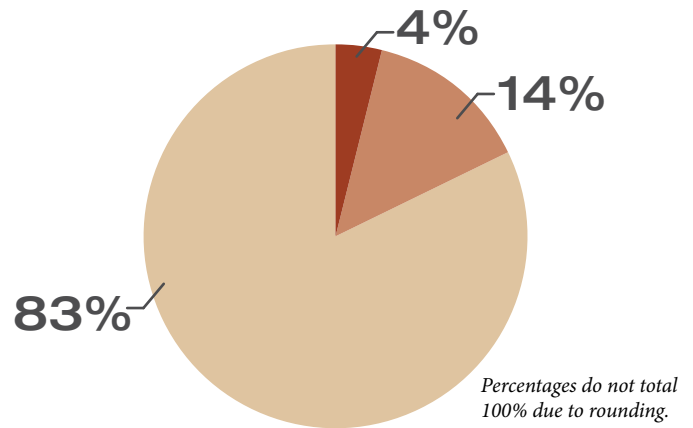
Seventeen percent of entering students who work report missing class because of work at least once in the first three weeks of class (N=13,422). Faculty members can't control their students' work schedules, but if they know whether their students are working and how much they are working, they may be able to make reasonable accommodations for students who must miss class due to a work conflict. Yet the data indicate that most faculty don't know how much their students work. Over 80% of respondents report that their instructors do not know how many hours per week they work. Older students report that their instructors know how much they work at a slightly higher rate than their younger peers, but the findings for older students still highlight that the vast majority of instructors do not know how many hours per week their students work.

Similarly, over 80% of entering students who work report that a staff member did not help them decide how to balance the number of classes they take with the number of hours they work. Again, older students are more likely to respond positively, but not by much.

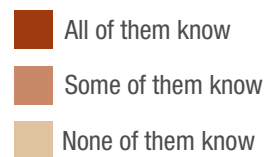
When students report that all of their instructors know how many hours per week they work, they are much more engaged across the *SENSE* engagement indicators than are students who report that none of their instructors know how much they work. Even some instructors knowing how much students work makes a marked difference in engagement.

Likewise, students who report that someone helped them make a decision about how to balance the number of classes they were taking with the number of hours they were working are engaged at a much higher level than are students who say no one helped them with this.

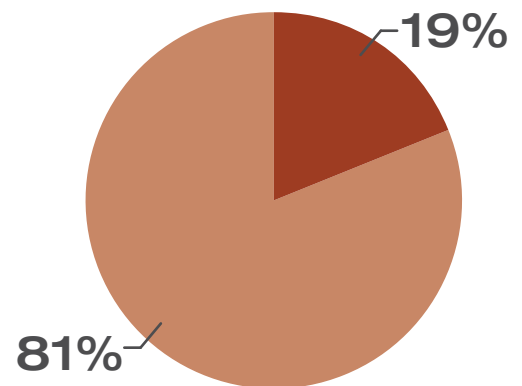
Do your instructors at this college know how many hours you work per week?



All Entering Students Who Work  
N=13,320



At this college, has a staff member helped you decide how to balance the number of classes you take and the number of hours you work for pay?



All Entering Students Who Work  
N=13,175



## Questions for Consideration

- » **What are the expectations of faculty for getting to know their students and understanding the external responsibilities they have?**
- » **How does your college encourage faculty to be aware of their students who work?**
- » **How does your college encourage and train advisors and other staff members to talk with students about balancing work and school?**

Although the data presented in this report were collected before the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all facets of life, understanding the needs of the working learner is likely more important now than ever. For most community college students, work and learning coexist. The task at hand for college staff and faculty is to help students achieve successful coexistence between the two. Finding ways for students to connect work with their studies, ensuring that policy and practice take students who work into consideration, and talking with students about their working lives all bolster student engagement—and in turn, are all actions likely to lead to increased student success.



# The Intersection of Work and Learning

## Findings From Entering Students in Community Colleges

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