

# Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority

For more than half a century, higher education has measured outcomes primarily for full-time, first-time students, otherwise known as “traditional students.” But the reality is that full-time, first-time students are a small subset of the individuals higher education serves. Full-time students also are more likely to be White, attend four-year colleges, and attend college without having work or family obligations.

In 2017, however, the National Center for Education Statistics began reporting on a new national survey, the Outcomes Measures (OM) Survey, as part of the Integrated Postsecondary Data Systems collection process. This survey provides essential information by tracking outcomes for both part-time and full-time time students four, six, and eight years after enrollment.

This news is welcome. As Complete College America (CCA) has demonstrated, acting on data about both part-time and full-time students is essential to moving the needle on college completion. CCA’s four pillars and the strategies aligned with each of them—shown below—are essential for both full-time and part-time student success. At many colleges, however, part-time students are less likely to experience these strategies, and colleges are less likely to closely monitor their progress.

## PURPOSE

Aligning the college experience to each student’s goals for the future

- First-Year Experience
- Career Exploration
- Academic & Career Alignment
- Adult Learner Engagement

## STRUCTURE

Building course road maps that make the path to a degree or valuable workplace credential clear

- Math Pathways
- Meta Majors
- Academic Maps & Milestones
- Smart Schedules
- Stackable Certificates & Credentials

## MOMENTUM

Designing multiple avenues for students to get started, earn credits faster, and stay on track to graduate

- Credit for Competency
- Multiple Measures
- Corequisite Support
- Dual Enrollment
- 15 to Finish/Stay on Track

## SUPPORT

Addressing student needs and removing barriers to academic success

- Active Academic Support
- Proactive Advising
- 360° Coaching
- Student Basic Needs Support

Data in the OM Survey can help change this imbalance. The OM Survey shows that while college attainment rates have improved over the past decade, the progress is largely due to higher graduation rates for full-time students. Part-time students continue to be left behind.

Part-time attendance, which unfortunately can serve as a predictor of poor completion rates, also disproportionately affects historically excluded students. It correlates with students' race/ethnicity, age, and the intersection of age and race/ethnicity.

Overall completion rates continue to be too low to meet both students' and employers' needs. Now that the U.S. Department of Education regularly

tracks part-time student attainment rates, colleges can better focus on meeting the needs of their part-time students so more of them can earn credentials, which will lead to more substantial improvements in overall completion rates.

This brief provides an overview of new data from the OM Survey's 2011–12 cohort. This OM data shows the importance of helping more part-time students earn credentials. It also provides an overview of steps colleges can take to implement CCA strategies in ways that better support part-time students. Future CCA publications will go into more detail about how colleges can undertake this essential work.

## KEY FINDINGS

Data from the OM Survey provides an untapped resource for better understanding higher education outcomes for all students. Key findings include the following:

- Part-time student attainment rates severely lag behind those of their full-time counterparts, regardless of sector or timeframe.
- About half of college students enroll part time.
- Part-time students are disproportionately BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, People of Color) students, community college students, and students ages 25 and older.
- Colleges are not currently designed to effectively serve part-time students. Improving outcomes for BILPOC students and working learners requires restructuring higher education systems to meet the needs of part-time students.
- Cost of attendance matters. Part-time students with Pell Grants have slightly higher completion rates. Reducing or otherwise helping meet the costs of food, housing, transportation, technology, health care, child care, and other basic needs supports part-time students as well.
- It is vital for the postsecondary field—from practitioners to best-practice scholars—to invest in research and create policy pressure for systems change regarding part-time student success.



## Clarifying Language

In discussing the people affected by racial inequity in education, CCA aims to choose words that underscore essential ideas, acknowledge the people affected by inequity, and are clear and consistent across our communications.

We use the following terms in this report:

**BILPOC (Black, Indigenous, Latinx, People of Color).** CCA chose this term in the context of its work on educational attainment. Using CCA's metric of college completion, the data shows consistent institutional performance gaps for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students.

**Historically excluded/historically under-represented/historically underserved.** All of these terms refer to groups that have been denied access to resources (e.g., education and health care) as a result of institutional racism. In the past, CCA used the word *marginalized* in this context. CCA uses the term *historically excluded* now because it most

accurately describes the cause of institutional performance gaps. The term *racially minoritized* underscores the fact that *minority groups* is a designation created by those in power so certain groups could be marginalized or excluded.

**Institutional performance gaps.** These are gaps among student groups in completion rates and other outcomes. This term puts the focus on the institutional barriers that are the root causes of inequities, whereas the term *equity gaps* implies that students are the cause of (and/or are responsible for changing) gaps in performance and completion.

## HIGHER EDUCATION STRUCTURES ARE NOT DESIGNED FOR TODAY'S STUDENTS

To meet our country's talent needs, our nation must ensure that 60 percent of adults in America have a postsecondary degree by 2025. Lumina Foundation recently released the latest update of our nation's progress toward that goal. The top-line results are promising. Since 2009:

- College attainment rates have increased 10 percentage points.
- All states have seen increases.
- Most states have seen double-digit increases.

Still, only 52 percent of adults ages 25–64 have a postsecondary credential. Moreover, only 25 percent of Hispanic or Latinx students and 32 percent of Black or African American students have one.

Meeting the nation's overall attainment goals will require restructuring the higher education system to meet the needs of the current student population.





Who are today's college students?

- 37 percent of college students are age 25 or older.
- 64 percent work at least part time, with 40 percent working full time.
- 49 percent are financially independent from their parents.
- 22 percent are parents.<sup>1</sup>
- 42 percent are students of color.
- 31 percent come from families at or below the federal poverty level.
- 53 percent come from families at or below twice the poverty level.
- 36 percent report not knowing where they will get their next meal.
- 9 percent report a lack of stable housing within the past year.<sup>2</sup>

Today's students face unprecedented tuition costs: Tuition has increased five times more than inflation during the past 35 years.<sup>3</sup> Between 1989 and 2016, tuition costs doubled after adjusting for inflation, and real wages remained stagnant within the same time period. Student loans now account for the largest portion of debt not related to housing in the



United States.<sup>4</sup> These factors surely contribute to the poverty and related food and housing insecurity experienced by today's students.

Despite these realities, Americans continue to rely on a higher education system that was built for the “traditional” student—a person who enrolls in college straight out of high school, attends full time, is financially dependent, and most likely is White.

This traditional-student design is reflected in the customary approach to higher education that is replicated across the country. Structures that worked well for traditional students with open schedules and limited financial or family-related obligations do not serve part-time students. These structures are accepted as the standard rather than questioned. Postsecondary structures that cater to traditional students include:

- Inflexible class times mostly scheduled during 9–5 work hours.
- Financial aid that is insufficient to stretch beyond tuition and fees to cover food, housing, textbooks, transportation, and other costs of attending college as well as health care, child care, and other basic needs.
- Financial aid that can be lost if a student earns a certain amount of money working while in college.
- Credits awarded solely based on classes taken and not on experience or demonstrated content mastery.

Clearly, college is no longer exclusive to “traditional” students. Increasing racial, ethnic, age, and income diversity has been accompanied by another major change: more and more students opting for part-time enrollment.

Part-time students bring a unique set of strengths, experiences, and outside obligations to college. Because the OM Survey provides data about these students, colleges can now begin to apply CCA's proven strategies in earnest, in ways that meet part-time students' particular needs.

1 Radwin, D., et al. (2018, January). *2015–16 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:16): Student financial aid estimates for 2015–16*. Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018466.pdf>

2 Lumina Foundation. (n.d.). *Today's student*. <https://www.luminafoundation.org/campaign/todays-student/>

3 *Ibid.*

4 Maldonado, C. (2018, July 24). Price of college increasing almost 8 times faster than wages. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/camilomaldonado/2018/07/24/price-of-college-increasing-almost-8-times-faster-than-wages/?sh=384c85f366c1>

## AFFORDABILITY AND SUPPORT STRUCTURES DETERMINE ATTENDANCE INTENSITY

For many part-time students, finances—including the need to earn money for living expenses in addition to tuition—dictate decisions about their educational journey.

Part-time enrollment is conventionally defined as taking fewer than 12 credit hours per semester, although the number of hours necessary to qualify for full-time enrollment is different for quarter, semester, and trimester systems. Yet 12 credits per semester is not enough to attain a two-year degree in two years or a four-year degree in four years.

Payment plans for students depend on the institution; some charge flat rates for the entire semester while others have per-credit tuition. Attending school part time often allows students to split the costs of tuition over time, rather than paying out of pocket or taking on massive loans.

School-related expenses, including housing, food, books, technology, transportation, and child care, add to the cost of attending college. Many students are also financially independent and/or have dependents they must support.

While Pell Grants offer tuition assistance for students from under-resourced families, undocumented students—who are 2 percent of students in higher education—are excluded from receiving this grant.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant has drastically decreased over time. For the many students who must work to pay for living expenses, reporting their income removes their Pell Grant eligibility.

A 2020 report from CCCSE shows how entering students (students who are in the first three weeks of their first term) view working and learning.<sup>6</sup> Nearly 7 in 10 (69 percent) of entering students work for pay, and 62 percent of entering students say that working determines how they are enrolled. Moreover, among entering students who work, 35 percent work more than 40 hours per week. From ages 18 to 64, the older students are, the more likely they are to work more than 40 hours per week.



5 New American Economy Research Fund. (2021, March 2). *Undocumented students in higher education*. <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/undocumented-students-in-higher-education>

6 CCCSE. (2020). *The intersection of work and learning: Findings from entering students in community colleges*. <https://cccse.org/sites/default/files/WorkingLearner.pdf>

## HISTORICALLY EXCLUDED STUDENTS ARE MORE LIKELY TO ATTEND COLLEGE PART TIME

Part-time students are disproportionately from groups that have been historically excluded from educational opportunity. Those attending college part time are more likely to be BILPOC students, students from under-resourced families, and students ages 25 and older. These student groups are also more likely to attend community colleges.

- More than half (55 percent) of students ages 20–24 attend college part time, and 64 percent of those who are ages 25 and older do so.
- Nearly half (48 percent) of White students attend college part time, while 64 percent of Black or African American students and 68 percent of Hispanic or Latinx students attend at this level of intensity.
- At community colleges, 84 percent of Latinx students and 81 percent of Black students enrolled part time for at least one term, compared to 72 percent of White students. This single semester of part-time attendance led to a 39 percent decrease in completion rates for Latinx students and a 31 percent decrease

for Black students. Completion rates for White students, by comparison, declined 29 percent when they switched from full time to part time.<sup>7</sup>

- More than half (53 percent) of public four-year college students attend exclusively full time, while only 25 percent of their two-year counterparts do the same.

It is important to note that students do not necessarily attend college exclusively full time or exclusively part time. Some students attend college with a mix of full- and part-time enrollment.

In addition, the part-time student experience can vary widely by institution type; a part-time student at a Carnegie-classified R1 research institution will face different challenges and supports than a part-time student at a community college. The differences will vary with each college's structure and policies, along with student and faculty demographics, the historical mission of the institution, the political landscape of the region, and many other factors.



7 Smith, A. A. (2018, April 30). Why part-time success matters. *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/04/30/success-part-time-students-key-closing-achievement-gap>



# OM SURVEY DATA HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED TO BETTER SERVE PART-TIME STUDENTS

The OM Survey provides completion rates for all students who enroll in a 12-month academic year that starts on July 1 and ends on June 30. It groups those students by whether or not they enroll in college for the first time and whether or not they attend full time in their first semester of enrollment. It also includes data on how many students transfer and how many are still enrolled. Data is provided for all students and also disaggregated by income (whether students received Pell Grants at any point during the year of entry). Unfortunately, the OM Survey data is not available by race/ethnicity or gender, which is a limitation in the data set.

## About Half of Entering Students Enroll Part Time

OM Survey data demonstrates what enrollment data has been showing for a long time: About half of the students who enter college enroll part time. The trends across institution types, however, are more telling. Only about 11 percent of students who enroll in public four-year flagship institutions enroll part time, compared with 60 percent of students who enroll in two-year colleges. In addition, just 29 percent of Pell students who enroll at public

four-year non-flagship institutions enroll part time, compared to 47 percent of non-Pell students. At institutions that offer primarily two-year degrees, 44 percent of Pell students enroll part time, compared to 71 percent of non-Pell students.

## Full-Time Students Are More Likely to Complete

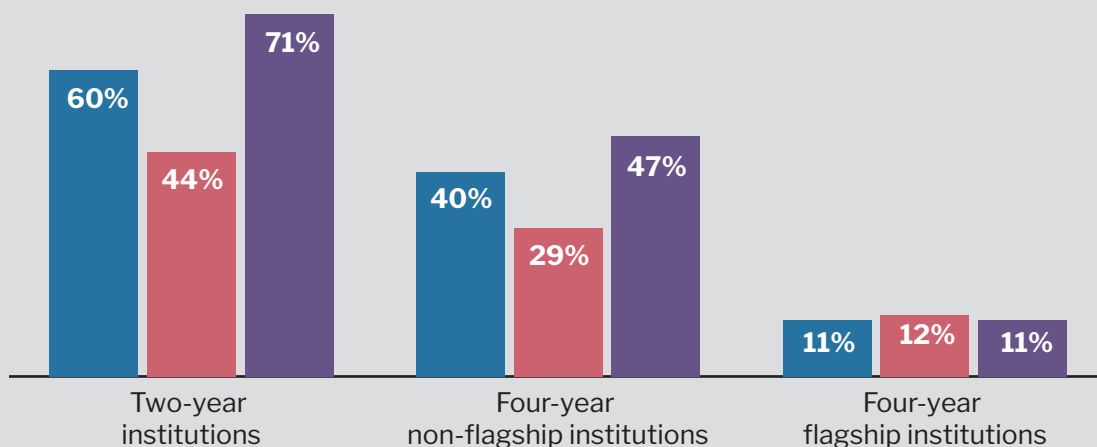
At both two-year and four-year institutions, students who attend exclusively full time ultimately complete their programs of study at more than three times the rate of exclusively part-time students and at more than one-and-a-half times the rate of those with mixed enrollment intensity.

Full-time students are significantly more likely to complete within eight years than students who enroll part time at entry. Fewer than 20 percent of first-time students who enroll part time at entry complete within eight years at the same institution. In addition, even though both full-time and part-time transfer students are more likely to complete than are first-time students, only 25 percent of transfer students who start part time complete in eight years.

### Most Part-Time Students, Regardless of Financial Need, Enroll at Community Colleges

Percentage of students enrolled part time, OM Survey, 2011–12 Cohort

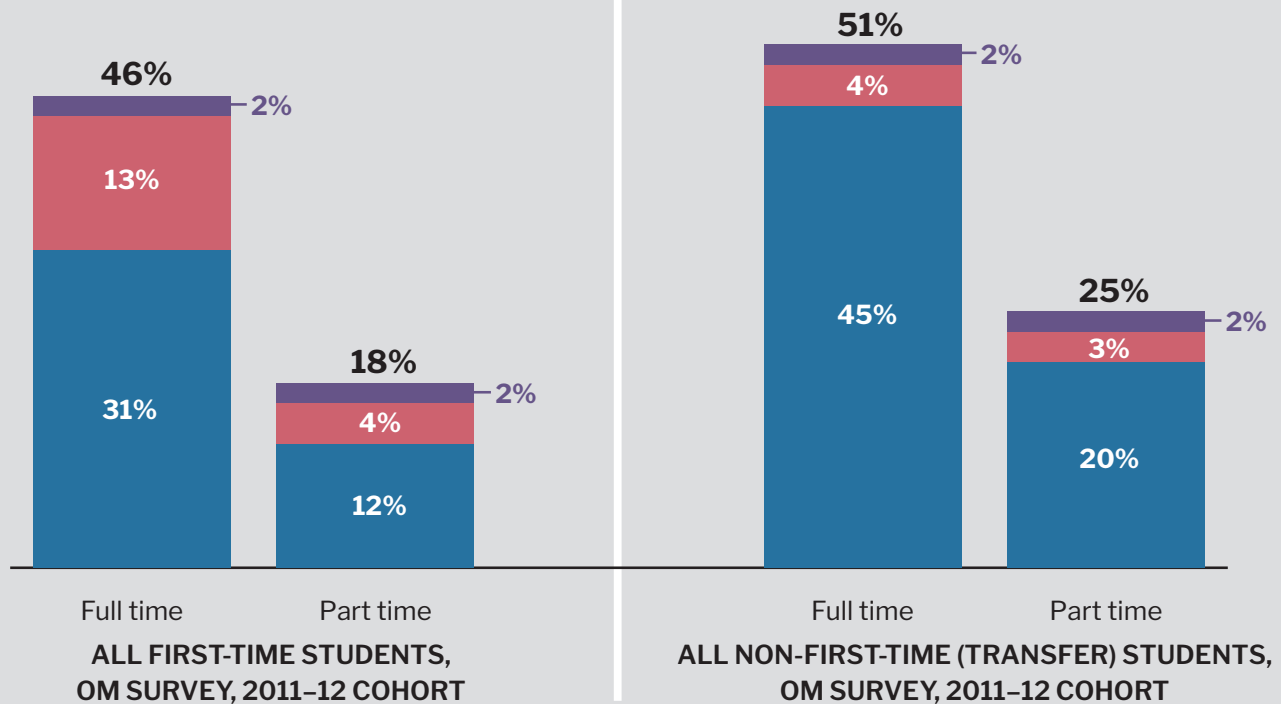
■ All students ■ Pell students ■ Non-Pell students



Note: Flagship institutions are those classified as four-year very high research institutions by the Carnegie Classification.

## Time Is Still the Enemy: Across All Institutions, Few Part-Time Students Graduate in Eight Years

Completion after: ■ Four years ■ Six years ■ Eight years



Of course, part-time attendance is not inherently harmful to students, and a variety of factors can affect part-time students' success. For example, student background can play a role as can students' academic aspirations and, most importantly, the systems institutions create to support part-time student success.

For example, the national nonprofit *Excelencia in Education* has found that most Latinx students progress through college with a mix of full- and part-time enrollment, with almost half of Latinx students completing their degrees in six years. Latinx students also are more likely than their peers to remain enrolled after six years.<sup>8</sup> These findings demonstrate one way that student background interacts with attendance patterns.

While colleges should encourage full-time enrollment when possible, it is important for practitioners and institutions to acknowledge that full-time enrollment is not possible for all students and create systems designed specifically to meet the needs of part-time students.



<sup>8</sup> Santiago, D. A., & Cuzzo, M. (2018, April). College completion through a Latino lens. *Excelencia in Education*. <https://www.edexcelencia.org/research/issue-briefs/college-completion-through-latino-lens>



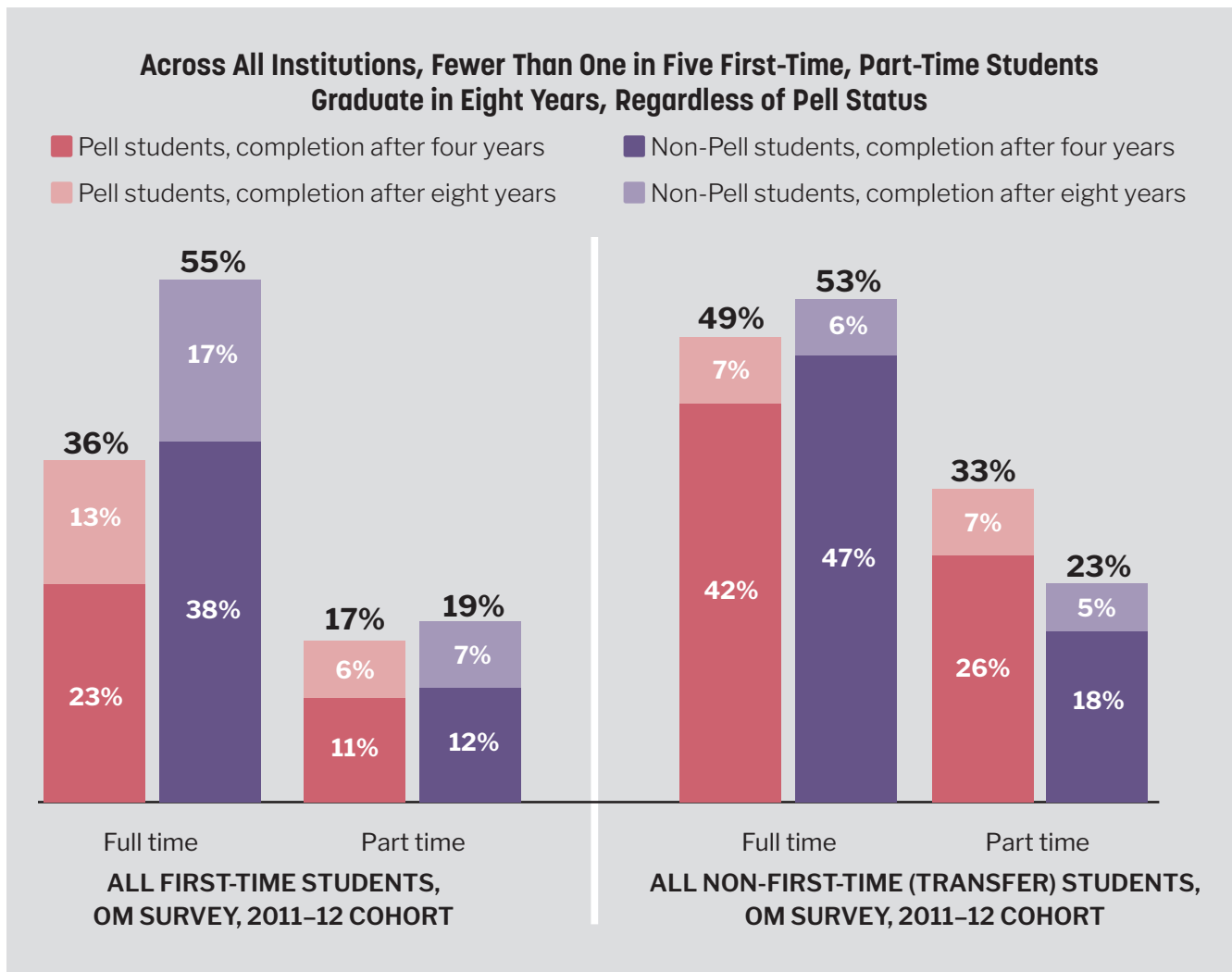
## Completion Rates by Pell Status

Full-time, non-Pell students are much more likely to complete college within both four and eight years than are full-time, Pell students.

On the other hand, students who enroll part time and do not receive Pell Grants are less likely to complete than are those who receive Pell Grants. One reason for this finding could be that many students with significant financial needs are not eligible for Pell Grants.

Many students in these groups may have great financial need but receive little or no financial support:

- Students who do not meet income requirements will not qualify for Pell Grants.
- Students who must work to support themselves can be ineligible for Pell Grants if they disclose their income.
- Undocumented students do not qualify for Pell Grants.

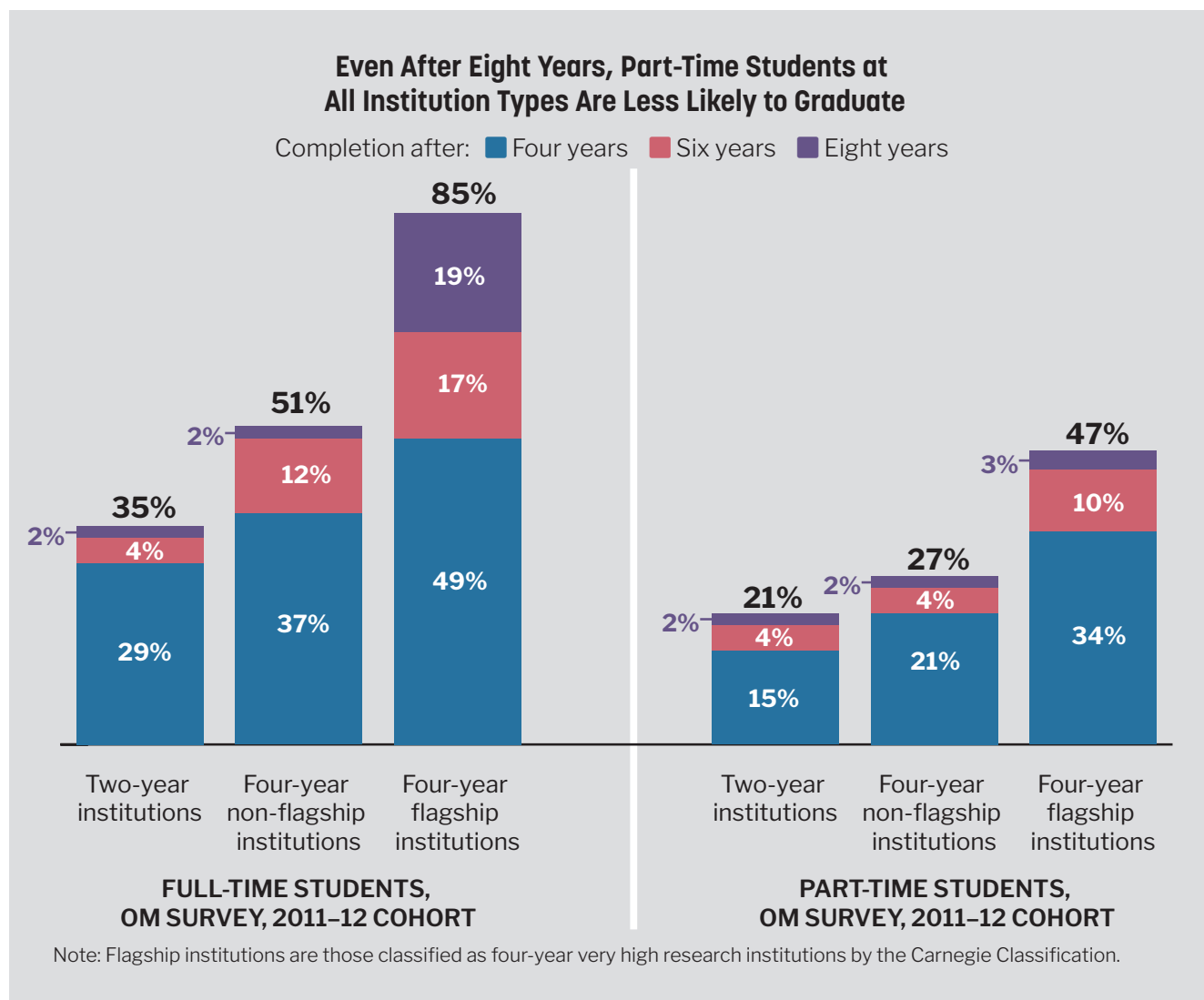


## Completion by Type of Institution

The type of institution that students enroll in leads to important distinctions. Eighty-five percent of full-time students who enroll at four-year flagship institutions complete after eight years, and about half graduate after eight years at four-year non-flagship institutions. Only 35 percent of students who enroll full time at a community college complete in eight years.

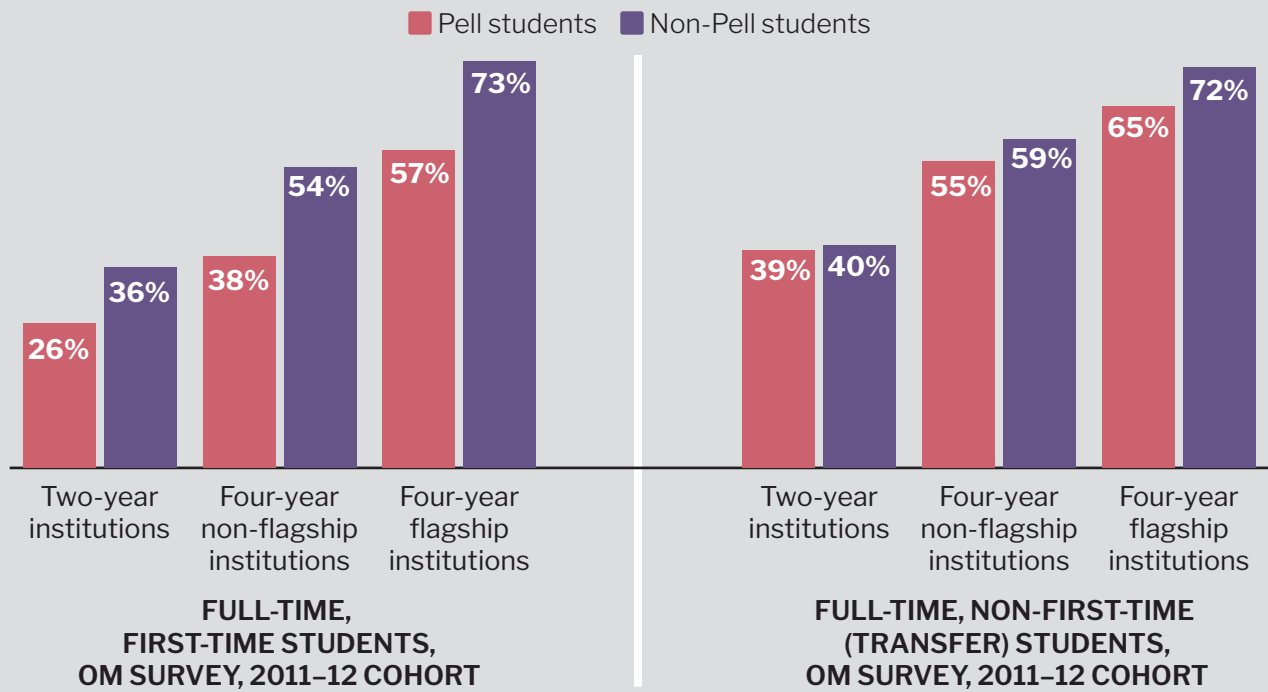
Slightly less than 50 percent of students who enroll part time at four-year flagship institutions complete after eight years; this number is just 27 percent at four-year non-flagship institutions. Only 21 percent of students who start part time at community colleges complete in eight years.

A number of underlying economic reasons likely cause these differences in attendance intensity and degree attainment based on institution type. For example, community colleges are open access and disproportionately serve students from under-resourced families. These students are less likely to have the financial support needed to manage a full-time course load, and they are more likely to care for dependents. In addition, community colleges are often underfunded; an analysis from the Center for American Progress concluded that community colleges receive up to \$8,800 less in revenue per student than four-year institutions.<sup>9</sup> Thus, these institutions typically have fewer resources to support their students, further affecting retention and attainment rates.



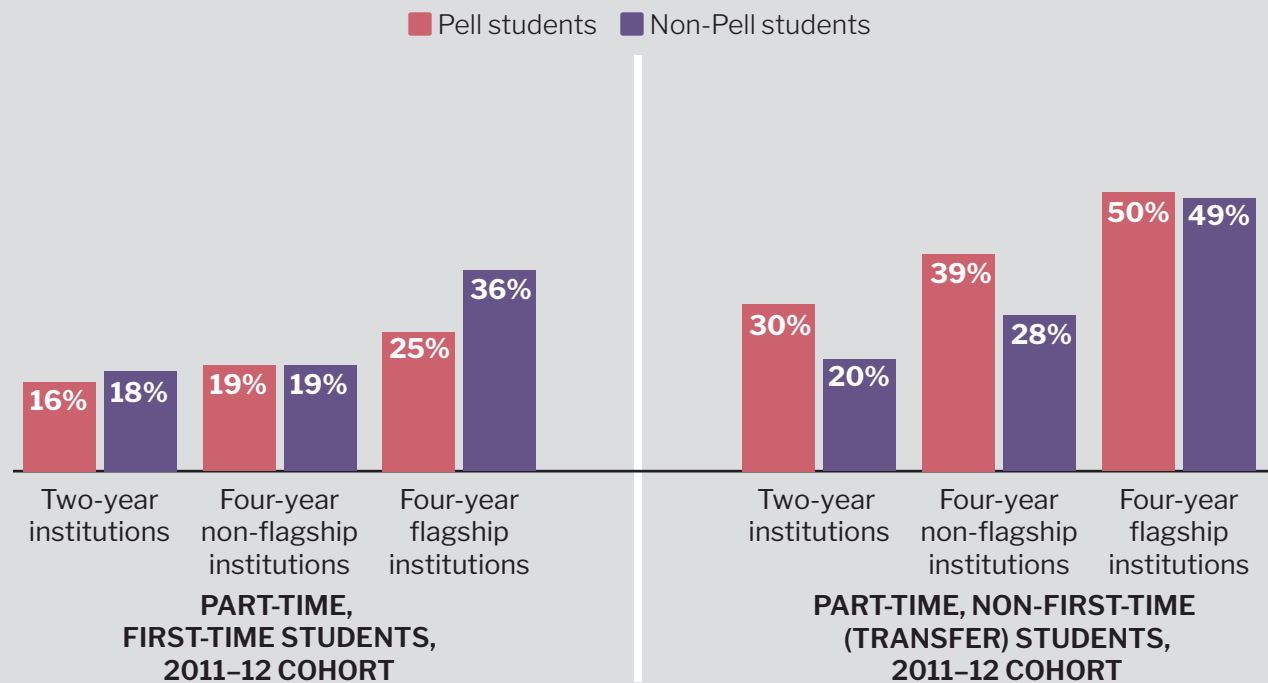
<sup>9</sup> Center for American Progress. (2020, October 17). *The \$78 billion community college funding shortfall*. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/78-billion-community-college-funding-shortfall/>

### Full-Time Students Without Financial Need Graduate at Higher Rates



Note: Flagship institutions are those classified as four-year very high research institutions by the Carnegie Classification.

### For Part-Time Students, Financial Aid Has Varied Impacts on Graduation Rates



Note: Flagship institutions are those classified as four-year very high research institutions by the Carnegie Classification.



## NEXT STEPS

The American higher education system continues to make strides in improving completion rates, especially for traditional students. Part-time students, however, who are disproportionately BILPOC students and students who have work and family obligations, are left behind.

While this brief focuses on data related to part-time students' enrollment and completion trends, in coming months, CCA will publish a guide to better serving part-time students. For example, part-time students must have access to career advising; first-year experience courses; and personalized, semester-by-semester education plans that account for remediation needs. In addition, colleges should undertake the following steps to meet the needs of this vulnerable group of students.

- Update the structure of the academic experience:
  - » Change class schedules so more classes are offered outside of traditional working hours.
  - » Offer shorter courses (e.g., eight-week intensive courses) so part-time students can focus on one class at a time while still completing multiple classes in a traditional semester timeframe.
- Add momentum by providing credit for experience or demonstrated content mastery. When colleges provide this credit, students do not waste time in classes they do not need, and they can earn credentials more quickly.
- Offer just-in-time, wraparound supports:
  - » Provide a food pantry, clothes closet, and other support to meet students' basic needs, and connect students to social services for support that the college cannot provide.
  - » Ask students about their obligations outside of college (e.g., work and caring for dependents) when advising them. Then work with them to develop realistic academic plans so they can accumulate as many credits as possible in the context of these commitments.
  - » Provide emergency aid to address unexpected costs that can derail a student's educational plan.

Local, state, and federal policymakers must also look at data systems. Beyond the introduction of the OM Survey, data systems can be improved so that all stakeholders can better understand



the underlying challenges and dynamics the data shows. Due to current restrictions on federal student-level data collection, postsecondary institutions are overburdened with reporting critical student success data to several different, and often overlapping, governmental and private institutions, accreditors, and regulatory bodies. This inefficient reporting system limits data collection and publication, especially across college, system, city, and state lines. These phenomena, in turn, limit information dissemination to the public, forcing prospective students to choose colleges based upon incomplete or elusive data. They also leave taxpayers uninformed about the returns on their investment in higher education.

If more students are to attain postsecondary credentials—to meet both individual and labor market needs—policymakers at the state and federal levels must make part-time students a full-time priority. They must address institutional performance gaps by making college more affordable and advancing reforms that remove barriers for part-time students.

The higher education system was built for traditional, straight-out-of-high-school, financially

dependent, predominantly White students. Its structures and policies make attending full time nearly impossible for the students with the fewest resources, who are disproportionately BILPOC students.

These challenges are cumulative, and they add up to one result: Historically excluded students are unable to access full-time coursework, which consequently lowers the likelihood that they will attain credentials.

It is time to consider how to create a modern institution built for BILPOC students and students from under-resourced families. What would it look like? Who would lead it? What programs would be the most conducive to student success?

Two upcoming CCA reports will begin to answer these questions. In addition to the guide to better serving part-time students mentioned earlier, CCA will publish a report on student success for BILPOC learners who are ages 25 and older. Many of these students also attend college part time. Together, these publications will explore how colleges can implement CCA strategies to better meet the needs of part-time students.



Access the digital report at  
[https://completecollege.org/resource/  
parttimestudentsmustbeafulltimepriority.](https://completecollege.org/resource/parttimestudentsmustbeafulltimepriority)

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Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions through data-driven policies, student-centered perspectives, and equity-driven practices. Since its founding in 2009, CCA has connected a national network of forward-thinking state and higher education leaders and introduced bold initiatives that help states and institutions confront inequities; close institutional performance gaps; and increase college completion rates, especially for historically excluded students.

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