Center for American Progress

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Hidden in Plain Sight

Understanding Part-Time College Students in America

By Marcella Bombardieri September 2017

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Introduction and summary

Missy Antonio is a 37-year-old full-time mother who balances taking care of her toddler son and 8-year-old daughter with studying for a college degree. Her husband works long hours, so Antonio is often solo chasing after her not-yet 2-year-old from the wee hours of the morning, and getting her daughter off to school and back each day. During nap time and late at night, she studies to keep her grades up to get into the nursing program at her school, the Community College of Baltimore County (CCBC).

Too often, it is assumed that the average college student is the 19-year-old living in a dorm and studying in the sunshine on a leafy quad. In reality, many of today's students have more in common with Missy Antonio than they do with fresh-out-of-high-school undergrad living in a campus residence hall. Many of today's college students are older and balancing college with considerable family and work demands.[1] In many cases, that means they can only pursue their studies part-time. In fact, 37 percent of undergraduates seeking a college degree or other educational credential are attending college part-time. That is 6.5 million students out of the 17 million students enrolled in American colleges.[2]

For Antonio, juggling school and family is complicated at best, and an unexpected circumstance can easily wreak havoc. That is what happened on a recent weekend this spring. Missy had plans to spend Sunday afternoon at the library studying for an anatomy and physiology test coming up that Monday. But then her daughter started vomiting Saturday evening, and Antonio was up all night taking care of her. On Sunday, her husband had to work an overtime shift, and her daughter was still too sick to go to her grandparents. Unable to make it to the library, Antonio instead wound up staying up studying until 3 a.m. Monday. She was able to sleep for just a few hours, then spent all day Monday caring for her toddler; that evening, she showed up for the exam exhausted.

"My brain was all over the place," she recalled later. She got a disappointing C on the exam.

That grueling weekend was just another challenging step on a long journey for Antonio to earn a degree as a part-time college student. Thanks in part to several noncredit developmental courses she had to take, Antonio expects it to take about seven years to earn her associate degree in nursing at CCBC, and then one more year to get a bachelor's degree at a four-year institution through a combined associate-to-bachelor's program. This is very typical for part-time students: Those who earn an associate degree take an average of more than eight years to do so.[3] What is more unusual about Antonio is that she has already made it more than halfway through.

"Everybody is always telling me I'm crazy," Antonio said about the time she has spent plugging away at school. In the wake of her surprise pregnancy with her second child, Antonio kept going with her studies. "I put so much time into it, and so many sleepless nights. I don't want to quit."

A first-generation student, Antonio decided to go to college when she got laid off from a job at an accounting firm where she had worked for a dozen years. Her reasoning for becoming a nurse is practical: She wants to secure a place for herself in the U.S. economy.

"I really want to have a job where people can't say, 'We don't need you,'" she said. "It's sometimes very stressful, but I just keep telling myself it's all going to be worth it."

Sadly, the U.S. higher education system is failing far too many part-time students. Only about one-quarter of exclusively part-time students earn a degree within eight years of starting college. Even those who attend part-time for only a portion of their college career fare poorly; just more than half of these students eventually earn a degree. That is compared to about 80 percent of exclusively full-time students who attain a degree.[4]

Moreover, too many part-time students never come close to finishing college and earning a degree. Four in 10 students who attend college exclusively part-time in their first-year are not enrolled in classes the next year.[5]

Low rates of part-time completion are not just bad for individual students who are seeking the opportunities that come with a college degree. The poor degree attainment outcomes of part-time students hold the entire nation back from meeting national educational needs that are key to keeping the United States globally competitive.

Policymakers across the country have increasingly recognized the imperative to produce more college graduates in order to build a competitive economy. In fact, the United States needs more than 16 million more people to earn a postsecondary credential by 2025.[6] The United States will never hit those targets unless part-time students are offered a more viable path.

In this report, the Center for American Progress details what is known about part-time students and their experiences, and explores what still needs to be learned to help them persist on the long road to a college credential. In addition to examining available data, the report shares the specific stories of part-time students at Maryland's Community College of Baltimore County, a large community college where 7 in 10 students attend part-time. The interviews of part-time students offer insight on why students choose to study part-time, what barriers they face, and what supports help them maintain their educational momentum.

As this report makes clear, part-time students are hidden in plain sight—that is to say, that while there is some statistical data about this population, there is much more to learn about part-time students and what supports are needed to improve their prospects in college and beyond. Currently, data at the federal and state level fail to capture their experiences and outcomes. And while there are promising practices around advising and tutoring, accelerated developmental education, adequate financial aid, and child care, there's limited research specifically focused on how best to serve the part-time student population. To the extent that policies address part-time students at all, it is often to offer incentives to encourage students to attend full-time instead.[7] While reaching full-time status is a worthwhile goal for some students who are taking fewer courses than they reasonably could, viable solutions are still needed for students such as Missy Antonio, who cannot realistically take on a full course load.

The good news is that new insight about where part-time students are most likely to succeed—or fail—is on the horizon. The federal U.S. Department of Education has begun collecting part-time graduation rates from colleges and universities.[8]

These data have not yet been made public, but initial numbers are expected to appear later this fall. Once they are available, these figures will allow policymakers and researchers to take simple steps forward— for example, identifying institutions that are especially successful with part-time students and can share best practices with the rest of the field.

It is imperative that policymakers and institutional leaders more explicitly include part-time students in their work to improve college completion in the United States. Hopefully, this report and the voices of students like Missy Antonio will inspire new energy and creativity in this arena.

The state of part-time students

The nearly 4 in 10 American students who attend college part-time are not evenly distributed across higher education. The vast majority of part-time students, 86 percent, are enrolled in public institutions, according to U.S. Department of Education data. More specifically, more than 60 percent of them go to community colleges—where they are also the majority of the campus population. By contrast, just 4 percent of part-time students are attending the most elite research universities.[9]

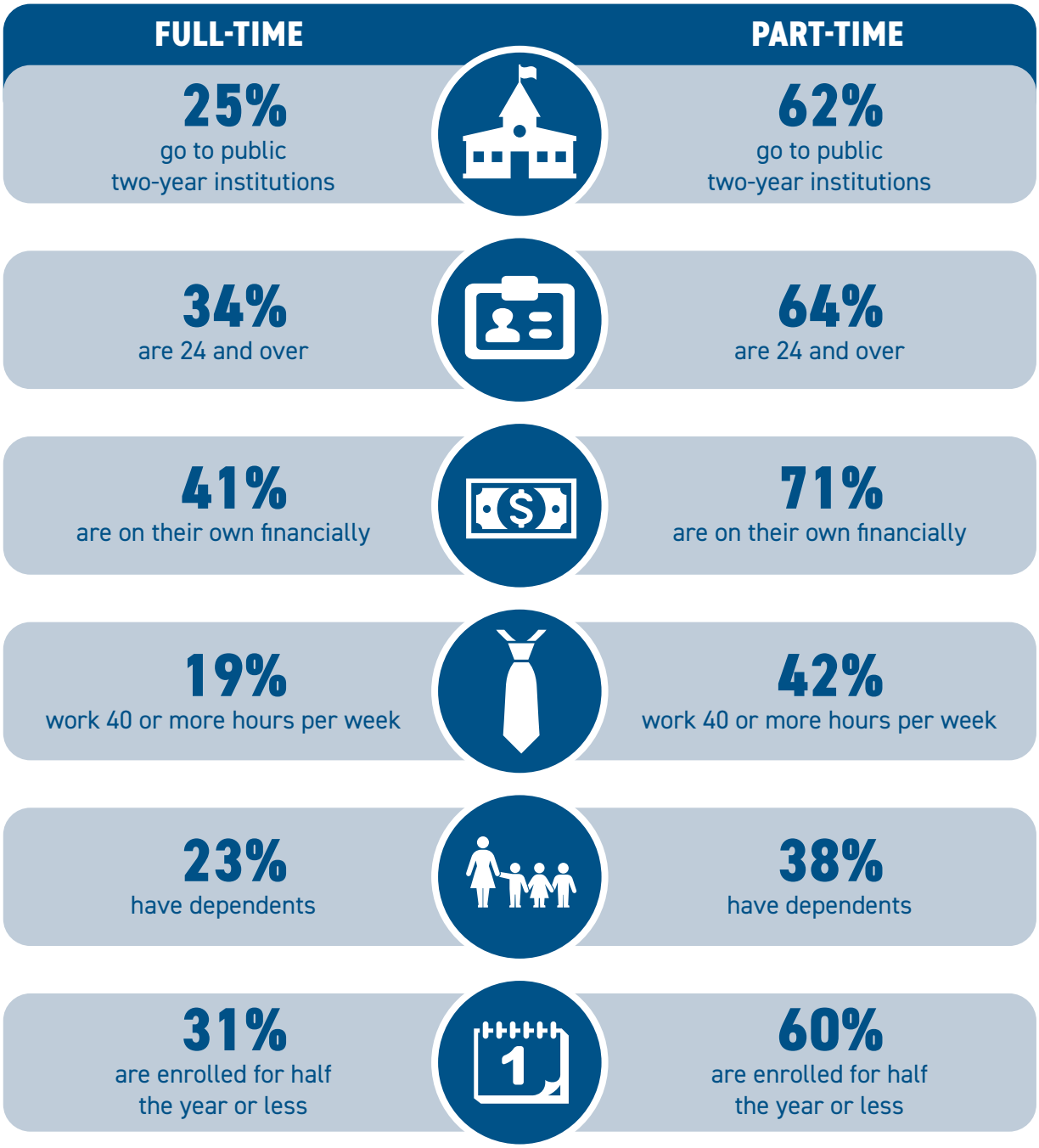
Broadly speaking, part-time students are adults with established lives, not adolescents transitioning into adulthood. (see infographic) Looking at students who attended college exclusively part-time during the 2011-2012 academic year, the data show that about two-thirds of them are 24 years old or older. They are far more likely to be supporting themselves financially, and to have children or other dependents.[10]

Part-time students also have much greater work demands on their time. About three-quarters of them have jobs and 42 percent of them are working full-time, compared to 19 percent of full-time students who work full-time.[11]

While the time demands that come from attending college at an older age along with significant work and family obligations mean that part-time students have some unique needs, in other ways they more closely mirror their full-time peers. For example, gender and racial breakdowns do not differ dramatically between part-time and full-time students. Both sets of students have similar incomes, although part-time students are bearing a bigger share of the cost of attending college, an important concern explored later in this report.[12]

A key challenge when looking at part-time students is that "part-time" is an umbrella term encompassing a substantial diversity of experiences. Nearly 60 percent of part-time students attend at least half-time, meaning that they take roughly the equivalent of two courses a semester. Close to 30 percent attend less than half-time, while the rest do a mix of both.[13] So the "part-time" label includes the student who is attempting a single course all the way up to a student who is only a credit hour or two shy of the 12-credit course load generally considered a full-time semester.

How are part-time students different from full-time students?



Source: Authors' analysis of 2011-2012 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study data from National Center for Education Statistics, "Datalab," available at https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/ (last accessed August 2017).

Further complicating matters is the fact that being part-time is a fluid status. Four in 5 students start their college career full-time,[14] but the majority will eventually attend part-time for at least a semester.[15] And many of those who start part-time end up spending some portion of their college career full-time.[16]

Unfortunately, current public data make it impossible to get a better sense at the national level of how students may move between full- and part-time statuses throughout their career, or how much of their time is spent full-time versus part-time. Because of limitations in how colleges report data, there is no way to map out how students move through their college careers. A helpful, if limited, snapshot comes from a study of five community colleges in a single state, showing that students at those institutions have a wide range of "chaotic" enrollment patterns.[17]

Balancing school and work

Pierre Tyler, 19, is a first-generation college student who wants to go to medical school or maybe earn a master's degree in nursing. A 2015 high school graduate, he attracted interest from lacrosse coaches at Division I and Division II colleges, but did not have the grades to get into the schools he wanted.

Tyler has the irreverent demeanor of the class clown, but he vows that he is ready to take school seriously. Today he is passionate about trying to instill in the youth football players he coaches what he did not know when he was a kid about the importance of academics.

This spring, Tyler was enrolled at CCBC and had a job setting up store displays for Pepsi. The previous summer, he had often been late for his developmental math class because he was working 60 hours a week in the hot months when soda sales were strongest. He took the fall semester off from classes because he did not have the money for tuition, but came back this spring.

Tyler expects to be the first in his family to graduate from college. His older brothers have spent time in college, but had to focus on supporting other family members. One helped pay athletics fees for Tyler to play football and lacrosse in high school, and the other had a child of his own right out of high school.

Tyler has a keen awareness of how much his family supports him, but it can also feel like a lot of pressure.

"My family, my friends, they are all pushing me towards this and trying to help me get this. Whenever I slack off, we have a conversation," said Tyler, his tone making clear he meant a serious talking-to from friends and relatives. "Everyone's like, 'You were the one we knew out of high school that was going to get this degree, so you have to do it.'"

When the author checked in with Tyler again a few months later, he had decided that working long hours and going to school part-time was not panning-out. He had flunked his spring English class because of poor attendance.

"I was taking classes hit-and-miss, and my graduation year got pushed back a year and then another year," he said.

As a result, Tyler has a new plan. Starting in January 2018, he hopes to attend a four-year college full-time. His family agreed to help him enough financially that he could attend school full-time, live on campus, and not work.

Tyler has set his sights on a public college in Pennsylvania where he thinks the biology program would be a strong springboard for medical school. He also hopes to play football for the school.

"I just decided to do it full-time or nothing," he said.

How part-time students fare

It is striking how poorly federal data do in answering the key question of how often part-time students finish their studies, especially at the institutional level. The main federal collection of higher education data from institutions—the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System—uses a graduation rate that does not include students who start part-time. While new data the U.S. Department of Education plans to release should eventually correct this flaw, these figures have been delayed a few times due to issues with the accuracy of data provided by schools.

Absent institutional data, the ability to track part-time graduation is limited to irregular federal sample surveys and proprietary third-party data. In terms of sample surveys, the National Center for Education Statistics within the U.S. Department of Education administers the Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) study. This sample looks at all students who start higher education in a given year and tracks them for up to six years. Because the survey is conducted at the student level, it can see how students fare based upon their attendance intensity. Unfortunately, the surveys are time consuming and costly to administer, so they are not refreshed that frequently. For example, the most recent BPS looks at students who started in the 2011-12 school year and tracks them for three years—not long enough to capture completion for most programs.[18]

The most comprehensive and frequently updated data on part-time completion comes from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center—a private organization in Virginia. It tracks completion rates by attendance intensity and can follow students even when they transfer. However, because the data it holds is proprietary, it does not disclose completion rates by institution.

Still, using a combination of data from federal surveys and the National Student Clearinghouse, it is possible to construct a partial portrait of part-time student completion. The picture that comes into focus shows that large numbers of part-time students do not even last a year in college, to say nothing of making it to graduation. The latest BPS data show that 41 percent of exclusively part-time students who began college in the 2011-12 school year had dropped out by the following year.[19] African American students and male students were disproportionately likely to drop out by their sophomore year.[20]

This is an immense shortcoming on a national scale. Every year, hundreds of thousands of part-time students show up at higher education institutions, and data suggest they have at best a 50-50 shot of even being there a year later, let alone graduating. Moreover, a look further down the line at who graduates from college shows that outcomes for part-time students are abysmal.

The best way to get at that completion rate is to look at data from the National Student Clearinghouse on students who started college in the fall of 2010. However, while federal data can define a student as part-time based upon their enrollment pattern in a single year, the Clearinghouse only counts a student as part-time if they attended college exclusively part-time during their entire enrollment in higher education.[21] If they started at a two-year institution, they must have reached at least half-time status for two semesters by the end of 2011. If they started at a four-year school, they must have enrolled more than once, or at least half-time once. This means most part-time students who drop out after one term do not show up in the Clearinghouse data, nor does someone who only attempts a course or two. As a result, only 7 percent of students fall into in the "exclusively part-time" category used in this data set.[22]

Even with this more limited definition, results for part-time students are still poor. The Clearinghouse data show that only 21 percent of exclusively part-time students who first entered college in 2010 had earned any sort of degree six years later. Seven percent were still enrolled, and the rest—72 percent—had left higher education. By contrast, 75 percent of exclusively full-time students graduated.[23] (see Figures 1 and 2) Underrepresented students had even worse odds than their peers. Black and Latino graduation rates of part-time students were around 15 percent, compared to nearly a quarter of white students.[24] That mirrors the yawning achievement gap that persists among full-time students.

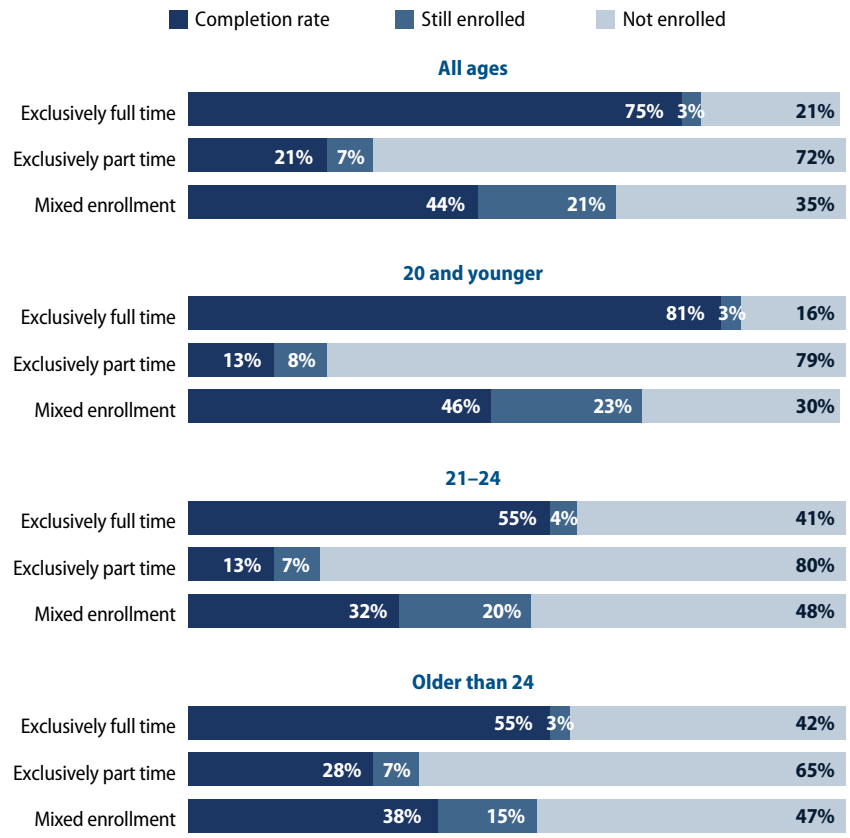
Interestingly, when it comes to variation among age groups, the pattern among part-time students is the opposite of the pattern for full-time students. While the youngest full-time students do the best, by far, part-time students older than age of 24 have more than twice the graduation rates of younger students.[25]

These variations hint at some of what needs to be done to better serve part-time students. There may be certain answers for older students who go to college part-time because they have steady jobs or family caretaking responsibilities. And the solutions might be different for younger students who may not have as many responsibilities and could potentially be convinced to attend full-time with the right advising and support.

FIGURE 1

Completion rates by age

Percentage of students who complete a degree within six years, by age at first entry



Note: Values may not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Source: Data are from students who began college in fall 2010 and include degree completion at their starting institution or elsewhere. See Doug Shapiro and others, "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates – Fall 2010 Cohort" (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016), available at https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport12/.

The complicated story of mixed enrollment

While the discussion so far has focused on students as if they are exclusively part-time or full-time, most of them actually fall into a middle "mixed enrollment" category. These students have at various points spent at least one semester in both a full-time and a part-time status. According to the Clearinghouse, a majority of college students—approximately 54 percent—fall into this category.

Overall, these students who at least dipped their toes into full-time enrollment have much better odds of graduating then the exclusively part-time students. Yet their chances are still appalling. According to the Clearinghouse, 44 percent of students with mixed enrollment histories completed a degree, and 21 percent were still enrolled six years later. That compares to three-quarters of exclusively full-time students who graduated within six years.[26]

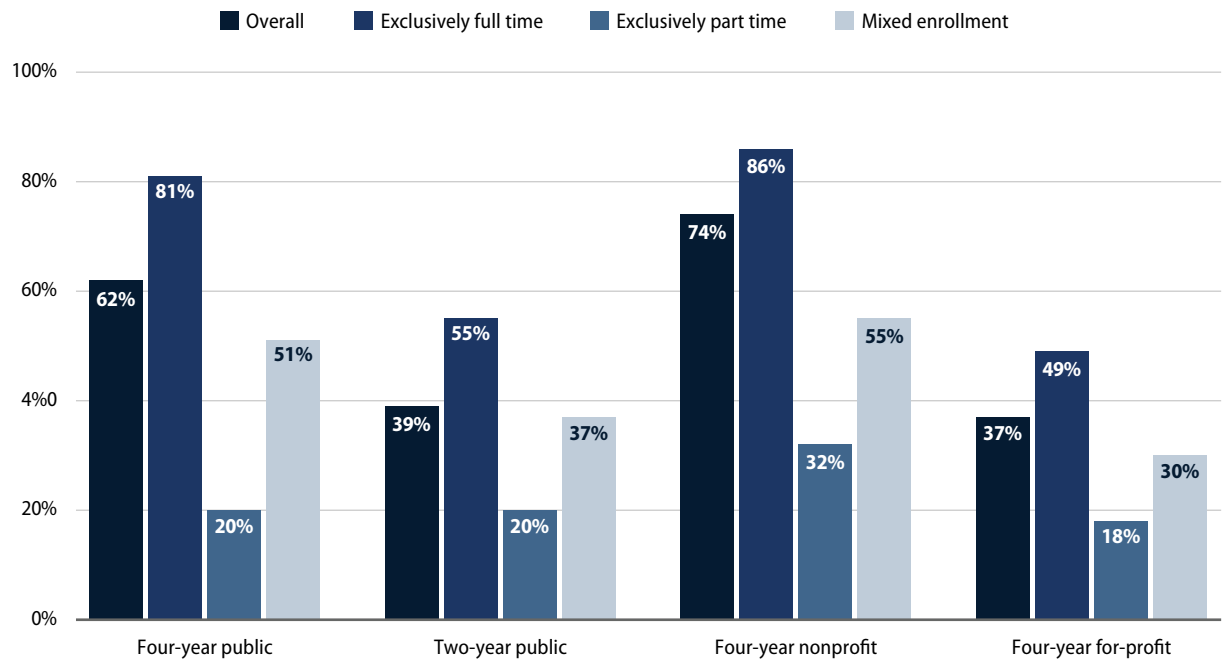
Unfortunately, because the data do not break down this group to look separately at those who are mostly part-time versus those who are mostly full-time, mixed enrollment students are even more of a black box than exclusively part-time students. They may do better as a group because many of them are all but full-time. Or there may be some benefit to even attending for one semester, as some groups have argued.[27]

The viability of a part-time or mixed path likely also depends on factors including the student's age and employment and whether he or she is a new student or someone who is returning to college after a gap.

FIGURE 2

Completion rates by type of institution

Percentage of students who complete a degree within six years, by the type of institution at which they started



Source: Data are from students who began college in fall 2010. See Doug Shapiro and others, "Completing College: A National View of Student Attainment Rates – Fall 2010 Cohort" (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2016), available at https://nscresearchcenter.org/signaturereport12/.

One study found that a mixed enrollment pattern seems to be a more viable path than full-time enrollment for nonfirst-time students, who are usually adults returning to college. It found these returning students with mixed enrollment histories had similar graduation rates to returning full-time students, and, importantly, were more likely to still be enrolled when the study ended. As a result, their dropout rate was significantly lower than that of full-time returning students.[28] As the study's authors noted, this may suggest that full-time enrollment is not always the right answer for adults balancing school with complicated lives.

Following a child's footsteps

Ivy Wilson decided to sign up for college for the first time after sending her oldest child off to the University of Maryland. The 36-year-old is a full-time senior-care coordinator in radiation oncology, and she wants to earn a bachelor's degree so she can become a clinical supervisor.

Nine years ago, she took the placement tests but ultimately did not enroll, daunted by the number of remedial classes she would face. This time, she felt ready. And yet, after her first night in English 101, Wilson almost did not go back, intimidated that she was already facing a writing assignment.

"I was ready to say, 'You know what, this just isn't for me. It's been too long, I don't think I'm focused enough,'" she said.

But Wilson kept showing up. A one-credit orientation class, which CCBC requires, helped her get comfortable, pointed her to supports that were available, and offered valuable advice. Wilson began emailing first drafts of each of her English assignments to the school's writing lab, which gives her feedback within 48 hours. By middle of the semester, she was earning an A in the English class and getting great feedback from her professor.

"Now I know that I'm more focused now than I was 19 years ago coming right out of high school," Wilson said.

The part-time tax

One reason why part-time students may struggle in college is that they are not getting enough financial aid. There may be a misconception in some quarters that part-time students do not need financial aid as much as full-time students because they are, as the logic goes, working their way through school. But that is overly simplistic. For many students, their wages are going toward basic survival. Moreover, time in the classroom, doing homework, studying for exams, or meeting with a tutor, is expensive, because it takes the student away from work or family responsibilities. Students do not just need financial aid to cover their tuition, they may also need to pay a babysitter so they can go to class or study; buy a car to get to campus; or purchase internet service to do their research assignments.

Even though full-time and part-time students have similar incomes, part-time students are bearing a bigger share of the cost of attending college, according to a recent analysis from the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO). On average, a traditional, full-time student with a family income of $30,000 or less attending a four-year institution would have half of her cost of attendance covered by aid. An adult 25 or older attending part-time with the same income could expect to receive aid covering only 17 percent of her cost.[29]

Eligibility rules that exclude nontraditional students appear to be a major reason for the aid gap. The SHEEO report notes that part-time students often do not qualify for traditional financial aid programs from the federal government or from states. Another study, from the Education Commission of the States (ECS), reached a similar conclusion. ECS found that 29 of the 100 largest state-funded financial aid programs only fund students who enroll full-time. Other states do not explicitly exclude part-time students, but have systems that in practice leave part-time students in the cold. Factors contributing to the lopsided distribution of aid include limiting the award to a certain number of school terms, as 43 of the 100 programs in the ECS survey do. And setting priority aid application deadlines, which means that they give away most or all of their aid funds to students who apply by a certain date. That practice can work against nontraditional students who are not planning their college applications months before enrolling.[30]

The result is that, in many states, part-time students are getting a very small share of state aid. For example, about half of students in Texas and Florida are attending part-time, but less than 20 percent of state aid recipients in those states are enrolled part-time.[31]

ECS argues that, "encouraging full-time enrollment is appropriate under many circumstances. However, it should not be done at the expense of aid eligibility for part-time students who are being intentional about their enrollment choices."[32]

Some students may not realize that their work hours translate into an income that is too high to receive some state and federal financial aid, a problem that should be addressed through better college advising. Another resource that would be helpful is one suggested by Julie J. Johnson, who was until recently a vice president of strategy at Complete College America working on improving on-time graduation rates: a financial aid calculator tailored to state, federal, and institutional aid policies, into which student could plug their wages and tuition, to see if aid would go up if their wages went down.[33]

Meanwhile, some state policymakers may not even be aware that their choices are excluding most part-time students. That needs to change, especially as much of the energy for improving affordability has coalesced around the movement for what is termed "free college." Several states and an increasingly long list of local communities are offering scholarships that, combined with existing federal aid, can make college tuition-free.[34] But many of these programs are limited to full-time students, perhaps to keep program costs down as well as to move more students to full-time enrollment.[35]

It is hard to object when new money is put on the table to help students go to college. But as states confront inevitable budget crunches—as seen recently in Oregon[36]—there is a danger that new programs for full-time students may crowd out aid for the rest of the student population.

Accepting help

Missy Antonio, the part-time student at CCBC who was featured in the introduction, said she has only been able to keep plugging away at school because she has figured out where to find help—and has not been bashful about accepting it. She only made it through her math requirements, she believes, because, "I lived at the math roundtable."

Antonio is such an inspiring figure on her campus that she is routinely recruited to speak at orientation sessions. She works five hours a week, for $10 an hour, as a senior mentor in the First Year Experience program, mentoring students and supervising other peer mentors.

After Antonio got laid off from her longtime job, she started out at CCBC full-time, but decided that was a bit too much. That became doubly true after the birth of her second child. Still, she started her first anatomy and physiology class just two months after her son was born in November 2015.

Antonio's husband is a superintendent at an environmental cleanup firm, and works grueling overtime hours. Sometimes, dirty dishes are her only sign that he came home to sleep and then left for work again. Fortunately, both sets of grandparents help with babysitting. When possible, Antonio looks to schedule classes that meet on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, because her mother and stepfather do country line dancing on Monday and Wednesday nights. And, on a few occasions when she has been in a pinch for child care, she has taken members of the student life staff up on their offers to watch her son while she takes an exam.

Antonio has put off applying for the nursing program, because it will be full-time and entail 12-hour clinical shifts. She needs to find affordable child care, and the campus daycare cannot take her son until he is at least 2 years old and potty-trained.

In the meantime, she has taken a few classes that she does not need for her program because she fears stalling out. It is common for both part-time and full-time college students to take credits they do not need, students and administrators say, sometimes because they have trouble scheduling the ones they do need, and sometimes because they do not have good guidance on the best way to plot out their academic path.

"I'm trying not to lose my momentum, because I'm doing good," she said. "I've got to just stick it out."

What we do not know about part-time students

Even though they are a large proportion of the college population, part-time students have often been relegated to the shadows from a data, research, and policy standpoint. As a result, it is difficult to even identify the bright spots where part-time students are more likely to graduate, let alone figure out what those communities or institutions are doing differently. The effects of this limited knowledge extend to a broader difficulty with policy. For example, many states and policy organizations stress the need to move as many students as possible from part-time to full-time or else build up 30 credits over the course of the year with help from summer and winter sessions. There are certainly some part-time students who can and should be pushed to do that. But a lack of understanding about why students choose to go part-time makes it difficult to figure out which students to encourage in a constructive manner and which are better off attending school part-time.

It will be impossible to improve success for part-time students without a greater understanding of their circumstances and the barriers they face. In particular, more research is needed when looking into four key issues:

- How does part-time student completion vary by college?
- Is part-time attendance itself the problem or is it a symptom of other obstacles?
- When is it beneficial to push part-time students to take more credits and when is it not?
- How do decisions about work hours affect part-time attendance?

How does part-time student completion vary by college?

For even the most basic question about part-time student success, answers are lacking. It remains unknown, for example, how completion rates for this population vary by campus. Currently, the federal government publishes only one measure

of outcomes for part-time students: retention rates showing the percentage of students who start college in one fall and return the next. This fall-to-fall lens on college enrollment is especially limiting because nontraditional and community college students do not necessarily follow a traditional academic calendar.

As mentioned, researchers are still waiting for federal graduation rate data that include part-time students. And sadly, most state data systems are not much better on this front. A few states, including Texas, Virginia, and Indiana, publish data on the part-time graduation rates of individual institutions. But by and large, there is no way to identify the colleges that are best serving these nontraditional students—or those that are least responsive to their needs.

There is one source, however, that does have comprehensive information on part-time completion: the National Student Clearinghouse. Unfortunately, it does not release campus-level data. It does offer state-by-state numbers, and it is certainly instructive to see, for example, that completion rates for exclusively part-time students at community colleges range dramatically—from 11 percent in Mississippi, Idaho, and Oregon to 39 percent in North Dakota.[37] But without the ability to dig deeper and identify the institutions contributing to a state's high or low graduation rate, there's no way to make sense of these disparities. Nor will part-time students be able to move from Mississippi to the Midwest to get a better shot at graduating part-time.

The campus-level part-time graduation rates that the U.S. Department of Education is expected to release sometime this year will offer a vast improvement in the ability to understand these students. However, it has major limitations, just as the existing federal graduation rates do, because it identifies students as part-time based on one moment in time—when they first enter the institution. A student who, for example, attends full-time for only one semester and then spends years as a part-time student will still show up as a full-time student.

To truly understand the relationship between enrollment patterns and graduation, federal data need to capture a student's actual attendance over time. Many education policy experts have called for this "student-level data system."[38] Making it a reality would require Congress to undo a ban on collecting individual-level data passed as part of the Higher Education Act in 2008.

Cost barriers

Stephanie Praglowski, 20, lives at home with her parents and did not qualify for financial aid, but her parents are not helping her with her tuition. The 2015 high school graduate is an example of what complicated financial lives part-time students can have, even if they are not poor.

This spring, Praglowski was taking her first few college classes while working full-time scheduling biopsies in a clinic. She also took out an unsubsidized loan that is building interest even while she is in school. That came on top of the credit card debt she took on when she paid part of her sister's community college tuition bill last fall.

"I would [go full-time] if I could afford my bills," said Praglowski, who plans to apply to the college's radiography program, and who came to her evening class from work one night in her Minions scrubs. "It's just a matter of money."

Praglowski shared an update over the summer: She had earned a 4.0 GPA in the spring, had taken several summer classes, and planned to take three classes in the fall, including two that she expected to be very difficult.

Is part-time attendance itself the problem or is it the symptom of other obstacles?

Students' lives are complicated and rarely fit into neat categories. This is especially true for part-time students. Many of them are older, working, have children to care for, or face other barriers that tend to impede postsecondary success. This creates a challenge for understanding the extent to which part-time status itself is to blame when a student drops out, and to what extent the life challenges that prompted them to enroll part-time are the problem. To be clear, this question is not meant to suggest that students are at fault for such a widespread problem. Whatever answer stakeholders settle upon, the higher education system needs to support part-time students better.

Separating out the consequences of attending part-time from the impact of other barriers is crucial for knowing whether current solutions to this challenge will be effective. For instance, there is considerable evidence suggesting that momentum is beneficial to getting through college. Some of this research, however, compares students who take 12 credits, which is technically full-time, to those who take 15 credits—which is what they need to graduate on time with a bachelor's degree in four years or an associate degree in two years. [39]

A 2012 study does examine part-time students, though unfortunately it is based on a relatively old sample of students who reached college age 25 years ago, in 1992. It finds that students who enrolled part-time in their first semester—as well as those who delayed starting college—had significantly lower degree completion rates than full-time students, even after controlling for differences in the socioeconomic and academic backgrounds of the two groups of students.[40] Noting that part-time students and those who delay college tend to have a more disadvantaged background, the authors write that these students "subsequently suffer an additional disadvantage due to their delay or part-time enrollment."[41]

It makes sense that diving in full-time is a better way to get comfortable with campus, get to know classmates and professors who can offer support, and develop an identity that centers around being a college student and working towards a degree. But that does not mean that an entirely or even mostly full-time path can work for every profile of part-time student.

Additional research looking at enrollment patterns for particular demographics, such as older students and students with children, would increase the understanding of what level of enrollment intensity works best for these types of nontraditional students.

When is it beneficial to push part-time students to take more credits and when is it not?

The number of credits students attempt is inextricably linked to whether they will ultimately graduate and how long it will take. In traditional academic programs, students need to complete a minimum number of credits—typically 120 for a bachelor's degree or 60 for an associate degree—in order to receive a credential. Take only six credits a semester, and that four-year bachelor's degree becomes a 10-year program.

While this report is focused on traditional credit-bearing classes, it is important to note that there is also potential for high-quality nontraditional approaches to help part-time students make progress faster. Examples include competency-based education, which awards credits based on what students know, and prior learning assessment, which offers credit for prior experiences, for example those in

the workforce or the military. Rethinking the academic year as a truly 12-month calendar is also a commonsense way to speed students along; some institutions are designing their schedules to put more emphasis on summer and winter terms and thus help students fit more credits into a single year.[42]

Still, credit load must be part of any conversation about boosting part-time students' completion rates or speeding up their college career. Ongoing efforts to increase credit accumulation for full-time students could have significant ramifications for part-time attendees.

It has been shown that it is possible in some circumstances to convince part-time students to attend full-time, but what is not clearly understood is what makes a difference for which type of students. Take the highly successful Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) program at the City University of New York, which demands full-time enrollment and also offers much more extensive advising and financial support—including free tuition, prepaid MetroCards for the public transportation system, and textbooks—than typically available to community college students. A rigorous study found that students offered the opportunity to participate were about 12 percentage points more likely than their peers to enroll full-time. The authors noted, however, that the study was not designed to disentangle which components of the program were responsible for persuading some students to attend full-time.[43]

"It is unknown exactly how much support is necessary to yield substantial effects on full-time enrollment," the authors write, "but it seems unlikely that such a requirement [for full-time enrollment] paired with far more limited financial and student service supports would be as fruitful."[44]

Some part-time students might just need better advising and a clear understanding of the downsides of part-time enrollment. Survey data show that nearly half of part-time students who have been enrolled for two terms think they can get an associate's degree in just one to two years.[45] This is, of course, very far from reality.

When students understand that an associate degree at half-time enrollment would take at least four years, some of them may find a way to boost their credit load. That said, given that 40 percent of part-time students do not even sustain a half-time credit load over the course of a single year, consideration must also be given to those who cannot take on any more courses, as well as those who could be pushed from less than half-time to a faster pace that still falls short of full-time.

Policymakers cannot assume that they know why students are attending part-time. For example, in her book, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*, Sara Goldrick-Rab writes about a student in Milwaukee who had to drop down to part-time enrollment after she was told that going to college full-time violated the terms of her family's subsidized housing.[46]

There are also many implications for part-time students as policymakers at the state level experiment with ways to improve college completion by boosting the credit loads of students who were already considered full-time. This movement is known as 15 to Finish—the name referring to the number of credits a student must finish each semester in order to stay on track to earn a degree on time.[47] In some cases, these policies provide additional benefits for students who commit to taking more courses.[48] In other instances, states require students to take a higher course load in order to receive the maximum need-based aid award.

Even as these programs tend to focus on moving students from 12 credits a semester to 15 credits, they could have an effect on students who are taking less than 12 credits. Proposals that tie higher credit loads to maximum aid awards could mean that students with reduced course loads get even less money than they did before. For example, imagine that the maximum federal Pell Grant was tied to 15 credits instead of 12, with no increase in the maximum award available. Students attempting fewer courses continue to get a proportional share. Whereas someone attempting six credits would previously have received half the maximum award, now that student gets aid equal to 40 percent of the maximum award—a 10 percentage point cut.[49]

While state policies that tie financial aid to on-time credit accumulation are relatively new, it appears that they can help some students do better while leaving others behind. For example, a recent evaluation of an Indiana program that requires students to take at least 30 credits a year instead of 24 to receive the maximum need-based aid award found that the policy induced more students to take a higher credit load, without any visible negative effects. However, students were only tracked as far as sophomore year, so the authors noted that more time is needed to determine the long-term effects on outcomes, including completion rates and student debt.[50]

To determine whether policies such as Indiana's have an overall positive impact on students, it is key to understand the downsides as well. For example, by design, Indiana's policy has losers as well as winners: Students lost their scholarships in

higher numbers. The rate at which students renewed their scholarships for a second year dropped 9 percentage points for one of the aid programs in question, and 12 points for the other. It would be useful to know more about these students who end up on the wrong side of the completion push. Do they take on more loans? What happens to their grades? What about their dropout rate?

Big dreams

The president of the honor society chapter at CCBC, Lejla Heric-Safadi, 36, is a parent and part-time student who is hoping to transfer to a four-year institution, then apply to Ph.D programs in neuroscience and pursue a research career. This spring, she was taking 11 credits—just shy of full-time—but she had slowly ramped her way up from one credits, to six, and so on. She plans to go back down to seven credits this fall because she had to pick up several shifts working in a restaurant because she needed extra money.

Heric-Safadi, who has 10- and 11-year-old children, immigrated four years ago from Bosnia, where her schooling as a child was frequently interrupted by war. She cherishes the American-style education she is getting now, with so many opportunities to ask questions, but feels like she has to work harder than her peers to catch up.

Heric-Safadi has an on-campus job as a mentor to other students. And she says the support she has received from professors and tutors has carried her through the many weeks when she feels like she is drowning.

"It is humbling, especially at my age," she said. "You have to just go and realize that, 'Okay, I don't know something and that is okay.' My tutor for biology and chemistry is much, much younger than me. … But he has this huge knowledge of chemistry, for example, and he helps me out. That is the whole point."

How do decisions about work hours affect part-time attendance?

One factor that may drive students to limit themselves to part-time study is the need to work. As mentioned earlier, three-quarters of part-time students have jobs, and 42 percent of them work full-time.[51] It stands to reason that if they could work less—or were willing to work less—students could devote more hours to classes and make their way through school more quickly.

Boosting grant aid has been found to lead students to cut back on their employment, but only slightly. A recent randomized experiment found that receiving a private need-based grant made students less likely to work, to work long hours, or to work overnight or during the morning—problematic times of day for students given the need for sleep and the ubiquity of morning classes. Yet students in the study had an average of $96 a week in additional grant aid that could have bought them out of more than 13 hours of work at minimum wage. But they cut back by less than two hours a week on average.[52]

Some of the students had to reduce their loans in exchange for the grant. But that gap might also be because students had so much financial need that extra cash appealed more than a better work schedule. They might have needed the money just to put groceries in the pantry.

The authors also note that in an unfavorable job market, students may not have many options to cut back work hours. Some employers demand a set number of hours or keep their workers on call, and it may not be possible or appealing to find a different job with lower hours or more flexibility.

Some students pay for college with tuition benefits provided by their employer. Others might appreciate the extra flexibility that spare cash can bring, perhaps allowing them, for example, to hire a babysitter before a big exam. Others yet, including Missy Antonio and Lejla Heric-Safadi, two students interviewed for this report, find a part-time job on campus to be an extremely rewarding way to build connections on campus.

Furthermore, those part-time students who have been out of high school for a period of years, or who are financially responsible for family members, often see earning a living as their primary pursuit and paramount duty, and less risky than the distant, uncertain prospect of a college degree.

In some cases, a good financial aid package—not to mention the improved earnings that an earlier graduation would afford—would make full-time study the better option. But that is likely a complicated decision for a student and his or her family to make.

Long road ahead

In the one-credit orientation class required for both full-time and part-time students at CCBC, students are given an assignment where they map out their education plan for the next two years, to help them understand what classes they need, and in what sequence—and how long it will realistically take them to finish.

In completing the exercise, LaSha Paschall realized that with her plan to take about six credits a semester, she would only be half done with her degree by 2019. That is despite the fact that this spring she was in class four nights a week, juggling English 101, a noncredit developmental math class, and the orientation class that meets once a week for half the semester. And that is all in addition to her full-time job in a medical clinic.

"I need to focus on the positives and not think about how much time [it will take]," she said cheerfully. The part-time pathway, she knows, "is long, it's drawn out and it just takes a lot of patience. Especially if you've got to deal with your everyday life—you have kids, you have a job. It's tough."

Paschall first enrolled at CCBC eight years ago, right out of high school. At the time, she was not focused on school and quit, but now she wants a career. She is getting adequate financial aid and feels fortunate to have a lot of family support. Her 8-year-old stays with her great-grandmother while Paschall is going to night classes.

Still, it is stressful. She feels like she is working all the time. Her daughter is tickled that mom is also in school, and they like doing homework together. But Paschall feels guilty about getting home late and trying to rush her daughter into bed when the little girl wants to talk about her day.

"That's the sacrifice," she said. "I knew prior to me pursuing school that I was going to have to make some sacrifices."

Conclusion

When it comes to the conversation about equity and student success in higher education, part-time students cannot stay at the margins. More research is needed on the interaction between student enrollment patterns and their success in college. It is crucial to understand what interventions— whether it is financial aid policy or campus-based measures such as reform of developmental education, so-called intrusive advising, and affordable child care, for example—make the biggest difference for part-time students.

When state and federal policymakers design or implement a new initiative, they must consider how it impacts part-time students. And if a policy seeks to encourage full-time study, it is key to know who gets left behind.

When community college administrators are asked about what they do to serve their part-time students, they frequently note that the majority of their students are part-time, so everything they do is for part-time students. This is not a satisfying answer. Part-time students face challenges particular to their long journey to a college degree, and the differences in their needs and experiences should be considered.

To be sure, the solution for some students is simply to take more courses. There is no question that full-time enrollment is, in a vacuum, a much better option.[53] The longer it takes to get through school, the more likely that a family crisis or financial setback will derail a student's plans. Graduating sooner also means more years to take advantage of the income benefits of a degree. And because part-time students spend less time on campus, they have fewer opportunities to get tutoring or advising, and to build relationships with classmates and professors.

But students do not make their college choices in a vacuum. The grocery bills, the rent checks, and the child care duties are day in and day out realities. For lots of part-time students, earning a living and caring for family are paramount obligations long before they enroll in college. Many students find they can swing full-time enrollment for a semester or a year or more. But to attend entirely full-time is not an option.

According to a U.S. Department of Education estimate, the part-time student population is expected to grow by 18 percent between 2012 and 2023, compared to 14 percent for full-time students.[54] And while it makes sense to encourage full-time enrollment whenever practical, it is not always a viable option. For example, Missy Antonio is not going to go to college full-time with an 8-year-old, a toddler, and no steady child care. Likewise, full-time enrollment is not an option for Ivy Wilson, who has a daughter in college and another in elementary school, and a long-standing full-time job with an employer she feels committed to.

It is clear that as a nation we need more answers for students like them.

Appendix

The students profiled in this report are not a representative sample of part-time community college students. Rather, their stories are intended to inspire further reflection on how to help part-time students.

All the students were interviewed by the author, Marcella Bombardieri. Missy Antonio and Lejla Heric-Safadi were identified with help from officials at the Community College of Baltimore County. Antonio was interviewed by phone in March 2017 and June 2017, with additional follow-up via emails and text messages in July and August 2017. Heric-Safadi was interviewed by phone in March 2017, and communicated with the author again via email in August 2017.

Pierre Tyler, Ivy Wilson, Stephanie Praglowski, and LaSha Paschall were all interviewed in person at CCBC's Essex campus in Baltimore, Maryland, in March 2017, when the author visited their orientation class, ACDV 101: Transitioning to College. The author attempted to follow-up with each of them in the summer, and communicated with Tyler via phone and text message in July and August 2017, and Praglowski via email in July 2017.

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About the author

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