

# POLICIES IMPACTING TODAY'S PART-TIME STUDENTS



Boosting College Access and Completion for All

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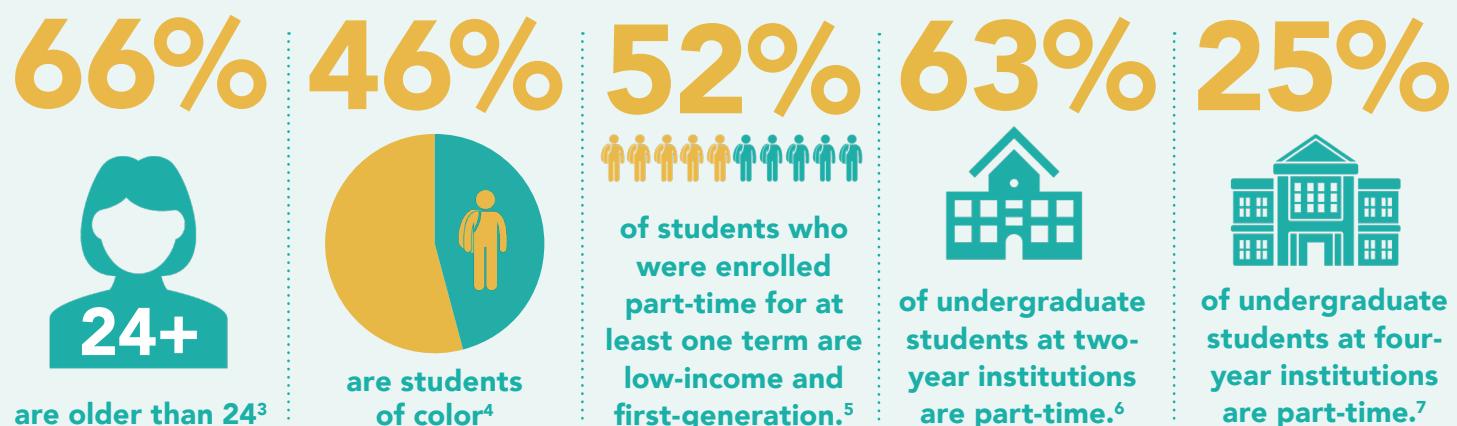
Today's students are more diverse than previous generations. Twenty-four percent are parents, 37 percent are older than 25, 49 percent are financially independent, and 42 percent are students of color.<sup>1</sup> About 40 percent of today's students attend part-time.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the current higher education system—and the policies that govern it—can result in barriers for some part-time students, such as the inability to access student support services and the misalignment between higher education and workforce systems. But, this doesn't have to be the case. Policies and institutions of higher education can better support part-time students by making career pathways more transparent for students and using technology to offer flexible and innovative student support services.

FALL 2017



PART-TIME STUDENTS



Part-time students also have unique experiences in their journeys to earn their degree or credential.

## PART-TIME STUDENTS

**48%**



of part-time or part-year undergraduate students received some form of federal student aid<sup>10</sup>

**\$3,860**

FEDERAL GRANT AID  
average amount



**\$6,700**

FEDERAL STUDENT LOANS  
average amount<sup>11</sup>



**44%**



of independent students are part-time.<sup>12</sup>

**43%**



of independent student parents are part-time.<sup>13</sup>

**21%**



of independent students living off campus and not with their parents are part-time.<sup>14</sup>

**81%**



are employed<sup>8</sup>

**46%**



work 35 or more hours per week<sup>9</sup>

## ► PART-TIME STUDENTS AND FINANCIAL AID

College affordability is a barrier to postsecondary success for many of today's students, and that is no different for part-time students. Part-time students are more likely to have family and work obligations, and they may not be able to connect with financial aid advisors or counselors to best understand financial aid packages and options.

### Likelihood of completing a credential within eight years at public four-year institutions<sup>15</sup>

**66%**

full-time, non-first-time students

**8** YEARS



**42%**

part-time, non-first time students

## STANDARDIZE FINANCIAL AID AWARD LETTERS

Once a student is accepted into an institution of higher education, the student receives a financial aid award letter outlining grants, loans, and scholarships that the student is qualified to receive. However, financial aid award letters can be confusing, opaque, and the amount of information provided in these letters differs by institution. This makes it difficult for students, especially part-time students, and their families to compare financial aid offers and to decide which institution best fits their needs.

Standardized financial aid award letters would better allow part-time students to interpret terms such as grants, loans, and scholarships; provide a more complete view of the packages available to them; and make it easier to compare one institution of higher education's financial aid package to another. This is particularly impactful for part-time students because many are independent students who juggle family and work responsibilities, and today's students—especially first-generation students—may not have a network who can help them decipher financial aid award letters.

## REDUCE STUDENT FEES

Student fees are often used for purposes such as student activities, libraries, recreation centers, safety, parking, and technology. Student fees vary by institution, and often students are charged these fees regardless of enrollment intensity. Further, part-time students' utilization rates of campus amenities may be lower than full-time students since part-time students are more likely to be commuting, working, and managing family responsibilities.

Decreasing fees for part-time students who choose not to access certain amenities would have the potential to lessen the cost of attendance for part-time students and may increase the likelihood of completion. For example, the University of Kentucky differentiates student fees by enrollment intensity and credit hours—in the 2019-2020 academic year, they charged a fixed amount of \$674.50 in student fees for full-time students and charged part-time students \$42 per credit hour with a 10 credit hour cap for any semester.<sup>18</sup> Part-time students at the University of Kentucky are charged student fees for only eight out of the 18 available activities/services, but the students may purchase the entire suite of activity fees to obtain access to all services. Other institutions, such as the University of Iowa and Oregon State University, use a similar differential student fee model.

Encouraging institutions of higher education to differentiate their student fees based on enrollment intensity would allow part-time students to opt-out of paying for campus amenities or functions they do not use and reduce their total cost of attendance.

In a 2018 study, New America examined 515 financial aid award letters and found that 70 percent of letters grouped all aid together, over 33 percent did not include information on the cost of attendance, and only 40 percent calculated how much the student would need to pay.<sup>16</sup> A study by CampusLogic found that 60 percent of students identified some amount on the award letter as being unclear; 70 percent of students identified some wording or phrasing as unclear; Black, Asian, and Hispanic respondents were more likely than white respondents to find net cost numbers unclear.<sup>17</sup>

BETWEEN ACADEMIC YEARS 2000-2001  
AND 2016-2017<sup>19</sup>

student fees increased

**106.7%** ↑  


at four-year public  
institutions of higher  
education.

2012-2013 ACADEMIC YEAR<sup>20</sup>

**\$1,719**  
**20%** average student fees  
at a public four-year  
institution  
of the total cost of tuition  
and fees.

## ► BETTER ALIGN HIGHER EDUCATION AND WORKFORCE SYSTEMS

Today's part-time students need higher education and workforce systems that best serve their needs. Part-time students are already linked to the workforce; 81 percent are working while in school.<sup>21</sup> Misalignment between higher education and workforce systems may have a negative impact on part-time students' career paths because they may be learning skills that do not meet employers' needs and that may not fit their desired career path. Aligning higher education and workforce systems can help ensure that part-time students are learning the necessary skills to succeed in today's workforce alongside their educational careers.

### STRENGTHEN POSTSECONDARY AND WORKFORCE DATA SYSTEMS

Historically, data on part-time students were not included in tools such as the College Scorecard and Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). As of 2017, outcomes for part-time students are now included in these data tools, but the data are not yet disaggregated by race/ethnicity or gender, and no outcome measures data were collected from non-degree-granting institutions.<sup>23</sup>

As part-time students consider where to enroll in higher education, they should be empowered with data about other part-time students to make the best decision about their potential return on investment for a certain program at an institution. Strengthening federal postsecondary and workforce data systems would better inform part-time students about their potential outcomes by providing disaggregated information on part-time student success and completion.

### MAKE CAREER PATHWAYS MORE TRANSPARENT

Part-time students should have clear and transparent information about career pathways they can follow to make informed decisions regarding their career and financial aid. Doing so will allow students to ensure



that the educational program aligns with their career path. Unclear pathways can lead part-time students down a winding road where they accumulate credits that do not meet workforce needs or complete training that is not necessary for their intended career.

Supporting partnerships between institutions of higher education and workforce development organizations would help ensure that part-time students are crafting career pathways that include the necessary skills and competencies needed to fulfill workforce demands.

Mary Arevalo, who was a working adult student enrolled in The College of Health Care Professions' (CHCP) medical billing and coding certificate program, pursued associate's and bachelor's degrees after completing her certificate program. With the help of her advisors, Mary gained an understanding in the beginning of her coursework about her potential pathways and was able to earn stackable credentials and advance in her career in the medical profession.<sup>24</sup>

## EXTEND PELL GRANTS TO HIGH-QUALITY SHORT-TERM PROGRAMS

Part-time students are more likely to enroll in shorter-term programs such as certificate and associate's degree programs, meaning that even shorter-term programs may be an attractive option for part-time students.<sup>25</sup> However, those programs are not currently eligible for federal student aid, therefore, students must pay for the programs themselves or through an employer.

Extending federal Pell Grant access to high-quality shorter-term programs could make it easier for part-time students to afford the skills training and credentials that are in high-demand in today's job market. Part-time students could also use the short-term credential earned toward further credential or degree attainment.

### A CASE STUDY: VIRGINIA'S WORKFORCE CREDENTIAL GRANT PROGRAM

In 2016, the Virginia General Assembly established the Workforce Credential Grant Program—a performance-based funding grant learners can use at eligible non-degree programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials—to better fill in-demand, employer-connected jobs.<sup>27</sup> An individual who utilizes the grant to enroll in an approved training program is only required to pay one-third of the full cost to the provider.<sup>28</sup> If the student completes the training, the state pays one-third of the cost, and if the student earns the industry-recognized credential, the state provides another one-third of the cost of the program to the provider. If the student does not complete the training, the student is required to pay another one-third of the program cost.<sup>29</sup>

Approximately 4,500 Virginia residents have used the grant to earn credentials in about 40 high-demand occupations. The average grant recipient is 36-years-old, with an annual salary of \$22,000 upon entering the program. After completing the program, participants typically receive a 25-to-50 percent increase in take-home pay.<sup>30</sup> Participants earning manufacturing certificates saw a 31 percent increase in pay; healthcare administrators certifications saw a 23 percent increase; and certified welders saw a 50 percent pay increase.<sup>31</sup>

**29%** 

**certificate-granting institutions**

**39%** 

**two-year institutions**

**8%** 

**four-year institutions**

## ► BOOST STUDENT SUPPORTS

Student support services are designed to help students transition into postsecondary education and complete their educational program. However, many student support services—such as academic or mentoring programs, tutoring, and counseling—are offered during the day, which may not fit the schedule of part-time students and could potentially leave almost 40 percent of the student body without access to these helpful services. Today's part-time students must often choose between going to the financial aid office, working, parenting, or handling other school administrative duties when institutions do not offer nontraditional service hours.

Funding innovative practices and programs that use technology to boost student support services can help part-time students access the necessary guidance and services needed to succeed in postsecondary education.

**97%**

**of today's students said that technology that supports them outside of the classroom is just as important as the technology that is used inside the classroom and as a learning tool.<sup>33</sup>**



### A CASE STUDY: TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY AT GALVESTON

To broaden access to services, Texas A&M University at Galveston offers a mobile application where students can plan their schedules, manage assignments, contact staff and faculty, and form study groups. Through the mobile application, part-time students are able to find peers with similar needs and experiences and form a community to push each other to completion. About 83 percent of students surveyed who used the mobile application said that the app helped them get off to a good start at the university; 96 percent of students agreed that the app has helped them feel like they belonged to the university campus and community; and 71 percent of new students agreed that the app helped them meet other students.<sup>32</sup> Through the mobile application, staff are able to assist with student support services, and part-time students can engage with upperclassmen to provide guidance on how to navigate through college.

## ► EXPAND INNOVATIVE POSTSECONDARY DELIVERY MODELS

Innovative postsecondary delivery models can help part-time students earn their postsecondary degree or credential by helping them gain the skills needed to remain competitive in the workforce and providing them credit for their work experience. At many institutions of higher education, the only learning that counts towards a student's degree is the learning that is done based on the credit hour system—the amount of time the student spends in the classroom. However, some innovative postsecondary education delivery models measure competencies and learning, rather than time, and it should be easier for students to use federal student aid to pay for these models and to receive credit for prior learning and work experience.

### COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION

Competency-based education (CBE) is a postsecondary delivery model organized around learning outcomes rather than how much time a student spends in a classroom or in a course. CBE programs are an attractive option for part-time students because they are able to move at their own pace and earn credit after they've demonstrated proficiency in particular competencies. As a more flexible, responsive model, high-quality CBE programs can be adept at serving part-time students with schedules that require learning outside the traditional academic calendar, including those who already have substantial work experience and some college credit. However, there is a mismatch between federal student aid and how CBE programs are designed, which can prevent today's students, especially part-time students, from using federal student aid to cover the cost of CBE programs.

Experimenting on a larger scale, such as through a demonstration program that makes it easier for federal financial aid to be used for CBE to allow students to receive credit for knowledge and skills learned outside of the classroom, is needed to determine the best approach to scale and support CBE programs. Today's students, especially part-time students, would not have to spend time and money on courses where they already have demonstrated competency.

#### A CASE STUDY: SINCLAIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE<sup>35</sup>

**Since 2013, Sinclair Community College has enrolled more than 2,300 students in its CBE programs, and adult learners comprise 75 percent of enrollment. CBE students at Sinclair Community College have earned over 1,200 credentials and complete their postsecondary degree or credential 35 percent faster than non-CBE students. Through the CBE program, institutions can reduce today's students', especially part-time students', barriers to access and completion by providing another option to the traditional education model.<sup>36</sup>**

#### PART-TIME STUDENTS

**66%**   
are adult learners.<sup>34</sup>

## PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENTS

In many cases, part-time students enter higher education with prior relevant work experience; however, that experience often does not count toward their postsecondary degree or credential. Prior learning assessments (PLAs) allow individuals to demonstrate competencies through assessments, and an institution of higher education may accept a PLA and determine it is equal to a certain amount of credit or credentials for a particular individual. Currently, however, the cost of prior learning assessments can not be included in the cost of attendance and, as a result, is ineligible for federal student aid.

A path for assistance to cover the cost of PLAs, such as using federal student aid assistance or reimbursement, would ensure that students are not wasting federal financial aid dollars on credits or courses for the skills and competencies that they have already mastered.

In 2015, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) invited institutions of higher education to participate in a PLA Experimental Sites Initiative. The experiment found that allowing students to use federal financial aid to cover student PLA costs resulted in increased PLA utilization, lower tuition costs, time savings, and higher completion rates.<sup>37</sup>

## MILITARY CREDENTIALS

Military-connected students often hold certifications from their experience in the military. When an individual is released from the military, the individual receives a form called "DD214", which is a transcript of everything an individual did while in the military. Currently, student veterans do not receive credit for anything outside of what is mentioned on the DD214, and each institution of higher education is responsible for determining what credit they will give a student for their military experience. The lack of a comprehensive picture of an individual's military service can impact a student's, especially a part-time student's, time to completion.

Recognizing all previous coursework, credentials, or experiences earned in the military toward postsecondary credits or credentials would help ensure that military-connected students are receiving credit for all of their military experience.

Student veteran Maureen Elias stated that her DD214 only listed the larger programs she participated in and some of her other coursework was missing—courses which could have transferred as college credit.<sup>38</sup>

**32%**   
of student veterans enroll part-time at institutions of higher education.<sup>39</sup>

## ► CONCLUSION

Part-time students need postsecondary education to be flexible and fit into their complex schedules that often include studying, working, and family obligations. As institutions of higher education and policymakers continue to work toward increasing postsecondary attainment and completion, policies, practices, and programs must work to reduce the barriers part-time students face in earning their postsecondary degree or credential to help strengthen the American workforce and economy.

## ENDNOTES

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