NC STATE UNIVERSITY

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IMPROVING THE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OF PART-TIME LEARNERS

NEW RESEARCH BRIEF EXPLORES IMPROVING THE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OF PART-TIME LEARNERS

In this research brief, Ginger Burks Draughon examines the unique challenges and experiences of part-time learners, as well as the institutional policies and practices that support and impede their long-term success and degree attainment. To bridge gaps in research about the part-time student population and institutional practices that impact their persistence, this qualitative research explores the experiences of part-time students enrolled in baccalaureate degree granting public doctoral institutions.

This research highlights several key action areas for policymakers and campus leaders to address changing demographics, support diverse learners and remove barriers to part-time learner success in postsecondary education such as expanded data collection, greater financial supports, better alignment between programs and the needs of part-time students, and increased training opportunities for faculty, staff, and advisors on how to best support part-time learners.

KEY POINTS:

- College enrollment demographics are changing, with the growth of part-time undergraduate students outpacing their full-time counterparts. By 2028, part-time undergraduates are expected to make up approximately 40% of college students (Hussar & Bailey, 2020).

- In order to meet workforce needs, state and national leaders need to increase postsecondary enrollment and degree production. As a growing population of learners, part-time students play a pivotal role in boosting college enrollment nationwide and allowing North Carolina to reach its 2030 degree attainment goal (myFutureNC, n.d.).

- Research shows that part-time students are at a disadvantage for degree attainment compared to full-time students. Only 34.2% of part-time students who enrolled in a postsecondary institution in fall 2013 had completed a credential six years later, compared to 65.6% of full-time students (Causey, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2020).

- As part-time learners' needs change and education continues to shift, adjustments need to be made at the campus, system, state, and federal level to support these students and improve completion rates.

EXPLORING IMPROVEMENTS TO THE POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION EXPERIENCE OF PART-TIME LEARNERS

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION

As state and national leaders aim to boost postsecondary enrollment to meet workforce needs and reach North Carolina's 2030 degree attainment goal (myFutureNC, n.d.), it is vital that they do so with the needs and experiences of part-time learners in mind—especially as demographics shift and the growth of part-time undergraduate students outpaces full-time students. By 2028, part-time undergraduates are expected to account for eight million students, or approximately 40% of college students (Hussar & Bailey, 2020). This, along with a changing educational landscape, calls for policymakers, educators and campus leaders to prioritize practices and policies supporting successful outcomes for this student population. Part-time students, many of whom are adult learners, face several unique challenges compared to that of full-time undergraduate students. Additionally, research shows that they are at a disadvantage for degree attainment compared to full-time students. Only 34.2% of part-time students who enrolled in a postsecondary institution in fall 2013 had completed a credential six years later, compared to 65.6% of full-time students (Causey, Ryu & Shapiro, 2020). This qualitative study explores the experiences of 23 part-time undergraduate students and sheds light on key action areas for leaders eager to improve part-time learner persistence and degree attainment in postsecondary institutions.

INTRODUCTION

Though part-time students are growing at a steady rate across all institution types (Bombardieri, 2017), limited research pertains specifically to this group. Instead, most focuses on adult learners, working students, first-generation college students, and other students labeled as "nontraditional." When part-time students are addressed in research, they tend to be grouped into the nontraditional student category, which encompasses a wide variety of diverse learners. This category includes students who are financially independent, have dependents of their own, have delayed entry into postsecondary education, work while enrolled in college, and/or are enrolled as part-time students (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). From a research standpoint, this broad category makes it challenging to understand the experiences of the students who comprise it. To be sure, it is not uncommon for some of these characteristics to overlap. For instance, 64% of part-time students are adult learners, while only 34% of full-time students are adult learners (Bombardieri, 2017). However, because not every part-time student is an adult learner, grouping these student populations together has significant limitations. This brief sheds light on the unique challenges and experiences of part-time students and what resources and services are necessary to better serve them. Using these insights, the brief explores opportunities for institutional policies and practices that aid part-time student persistence and degree attainment.

THE PROJECT

Based on research suggesting that part-time students struggle with belonging in some four-year institutions (Kasworm, 2010), this study examined the experiences of 23 current or former part-time undergraduate students at a public university. The case study used interviews for participants, who were enrolled in at least one fall or spring semester from January 2008-2019 at "Duncan University"[1].

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[1] "Duncan University" is a public baccalaureate degree granting doctoral/research institution in a large city in the southeast. There are approximately 2,100 degree seeking part-time undergraduates attending the institution. Duncan University's student body is 51% students of color.

FINDINGS AND KEY ACTION AREAS FOR DECISION MAKERS:
IMPACT ON PRACTICE & POLICY

1. EXPAND RECOGNITION OF PART-TIME STUDENTS THROUGH IMPROVED DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS AND THE CREATION OF STUDENT PROFILES.

Administrators interviewed as part of this case study noted that part-time students do not receive much attention or consideration in strategic planning, policy making, and admissions decisions. In order to improve enrollment and degree production in postsecondary institutions, it is critical for policymakers and campus leaders to have a deeper understanding of the various student populations they serve. As student demographics change and part-time student enrollment increases, it is particularly important for decision makers to examine data pertaining to the enrollment, persistence, and completion rates of part-time learners. Historically grouped into a broader category of "nontraditional" students, part-time students suffer a disadvantage in the postsecondary environment compared to full-time students—not only because of their unique circumstances, but also because of a lack of awareness about the population's presence in postsecondary institutions and the policies and practices hampering their success.

Improved data collection, data analysis, and distribution at the federal, state, and institutional levels offers a way forward. On a federal level, improved data collection plays an important role in understanding the landscape of higher education and how to best serve the nation's diverse student populations. At the state level, data disaggregation of statewide demographics helps leaders offer better student support and make progress toward college enrollment and completion goals. In North Carolina, this work has already begun with myFutureNC, a dashboard measuring various progress indicators. On an institutional level, campus leaders should regularly analyze and review existing student population data, as well as demographic data, in order to understand changes and trends in enrollment, makeup of students in particular programs, etc. Additionally, institutions could create and incorporate robust tracking models that can be used for institutional planning that provide detailed, disaggregated overviews of part-time student pathways through the institution to better understand obstacles to degree completion.

Institutional policies and practices tend to be designed with full-time students in mind, thereby overlooking part-time students. For example, part-time learners described that many of the degree planning resources are designed exclusively for full-time students rather than also providing a pathway for part-time students. Accordingly, these policies and practices are not always well-suited for the needs and circumstances of part-time learners. One way to bridge this gap is to develop student profiles representing diverse groups of learners. Ideally, these student profiles would represent both current and future college students by taking into consideration existing student population data and the types of future students needed to meet enrollment and college completion targets.

Providing tangible examples of various student populations, these student profiles can help increase visibility of diverse learners on campus and promote understanding about their unique experiences and needs. Accordingly, the profiles would allow policymakers and campus leaders to evaluate their current and potential policies and practices with the needs of a wide variety of student groups, including part-time students, in mind. For example, The Alamo Colleges District – a network of five community colleges in San Antonio and Universal City, Texas – publicizes student profiles about Cheryl and Jasmine in order to help campus leaders consider how they think about and serve students like them.

2. REFORM POLICIES AND PRACTICES TO BETTER SUPPORT PART-TIME STUDENTS THROUGH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE OPTIONS.

Part-time student participants in this study repeatedly emphasized the importance of having an affordable education and availability and access to financial aid throughout their educational journey. Sources of federal financial aid, such as Pell grants and low/no interest loan programs through FAFSA, are critical for undergraduate students. Many part-time students are disadvantaged if they are enrolled less than half-time as their access to loans and grants is severely limited or completely cut off. This is a problem on a state level, as well. In North Carolina, students enrolled in less than six credit hours per semester are ineligible for the state's four education grants: the NC Education Lottery Scholarship, NC Community College Grant, UNC Need-Based Grant and NC Need-Based Scholarship. Accordingly, state aid programs should be reevaluated and adapted to better serve the state's diverse learners.

Many part-time students also encounter time limits on student loans. Depending on the amount of time it takes for them to complete their degree, they may hit their maximum aid eligibility and struggle to access the funding they need to graduate. This is a particular problem for community college transfers, who use a high percentage of their aid availability at the community college level and hit their maximums with only a few courses left to complete. On the institutional level, campus leaders can craft course pathways and graduation plans matching up with students' aid eligibility and educate advisors to help students avoid reaching their maximums. Policymakers can also alleviate this burden by extending aid maximums by a limited number of semesters or courses for students in this situation. Additionally, state and national policymakers can serve part-time students by increasing incentives for employers to cover or reimburse students' tuition and fees, and by allocating funding and other resources to support completion assistance. The "finish line" grant program is an example of a program serving all students, and can be extremely helpful for part-time students who have limited access to aid because of their enrollment status.

3. EVALUATE REVENUE STREAMS, SUCH AS STATE FUNDING MODELS AND INSTITUTIONAL FEES THAT IMPACT PART-TIME STUDENTS.

State funding models based on enrollment typically don't weigh part-time students as heavily, so greater emphasis needs to be given to part-time students in order to keep up with demographic changes and shifting educational needs. Because state funding impacts enrollment, persistence and degree attainment rates, as well as the affordability of higher education and the resources offered to students, leaders must reevaluate higher education funding at the state level to ensure the success of all learners. Specifically, funding models should support and enhance access to educational services on nights and weekends to address the needs of part-time students. Furthermore, part-time students should not be required to pay fees for services they are unable to access or benefit from. Additionally, state leaders should consider the consequences of performance-based funding models, which can stigmatize part-time enrollment by rewarding increasing baccalaureate graduation rates. Instead, they ought to reward increases in the numbers of students hitting "milestone measures" or "momentum points" – signaling likelihood of degree completion.

4. RECONSIDER ACADEMIC POLICIES, PROGRAMS, AND PRACTICES TO BETTER SERVE PART-TIME STUDENTS.

One theme from the findings of this research was that the majority of the participants transferred into Duncan University from both two-year and baccalaureate institutions. To better support part-time students, many of whom are transfer students, institutions should regularly review transfer policies to ensure they do not penalize students. Many participants noted difficulty in transferring courses into the university, some of which ultimately did not count toward their degree requirements. For context, students transferring from two-year to baccalaureate degree granting institutions lose an average of 26% of their credits in the transfer process. For many part-time students, this loss impacts their progress towards degree completion as the "secondary" loss of sufficient financial aid availability makes continued enrollment tenuous.

Findings also indicated a need for greater flexibility in degree program designs, course schedules, and delivery modes to ensure that institutions are conducive to part-time learning. Part-time learners shared that they wanted to enter into degree programs for high-demand professions like teaching and nursing; however, programmatic requirements, such as a cohort based model, prohibited them from entering these programs. To improve part-time student enrollment and completion rates, especially for degree programs preparing graduates for high-demand professions, campus leaders should modify academic programs to better suit the needs of part-time learners. Based on participant experiences, this may include removing limitations on course delivery methods or redesigning internships and practicum requirements that are often inaccessible or burdensome to part-time students with other obligations. Campus leaders can also aid part-time student success by supporting students with part-time course sequencing and graduation pathways.

Increasing both the quantity and quality of online courses is key to completion for part-time students. Many courses are offered at the same time – most often weekday, daytime hours – which is significantly disadvantageous to adult learners who are employed in completing their programs. In addition to accommodating time constraints, online education provides the geographical and flexibility to "older students with work and family obligations, those in rural areas who do not have the option to relocate, and those whose employment responsibilities do not fit with college schedules" (Baum & McPherson, 2019).

5. ENCOURAGE AND EDUCATE FACULTY, ADVISORS, AND STAFF IN BEST PRACTICES SPECIFIC TO CREATING POSITIVE EXPERIENCES AND INFLUENCING PERSISTENCE AND COMPLETION FOR PART-TIME STUDENTS

Participants shared that positive interactions with faculty members and advisors were incredibly important to their success. Findings also indicated that establishing a single point of contact, especially someone who understands the part-time student experience, can be particularly beneficial for these learners. Because positive faculty interactions play an instrumental role in part-time student persistence and completion rates, institutions of higher education must help faculty members support part-time learners by understanding their predominance in the student body population as well as their unique circumstances and challenges in academic settings. For part-time students, the majority of their personal interaction comes through faculty members, making this professional learning for faculty all the more important for their long-term success. Practically, faculty can also support these learners by being mindful of their external obligations, such as work and family. This may include designating class time to complete group work in addition to providing opportunities to integrate aspects from part-time student's lived experiences into classroom assignments. This could entail designing papers or presentations that can be tailored to their applicable professional experiences. Another promising practice is for faculty to provide flexibility with due dates and to encourage students to proactively communicate how the course schedule aligns with their other family and/or professional obligations. Including this key element helps to establish a respectful relationship between faculty and part-time learners.

From streamlining campus communications, to simplifying accessibility, to campus services like parking, every decision is an opportunity to accommodate part-time students and create a culture of belonging on campus. Additionally, faculty and staff must not underestimate the importance of everyday interactions with students, like an encouraging email reminding students of resources, and the university's commitment to their success. Allowing flexibility with office hours and communications help to ensure part-time students are receiving just-in-time support. Finally, institutions better the part-time student experience by recognizing the offices, units, departments and individuals who support this student population well and offering these exemplars additional resources, when possible, to grow and enhance their programs.
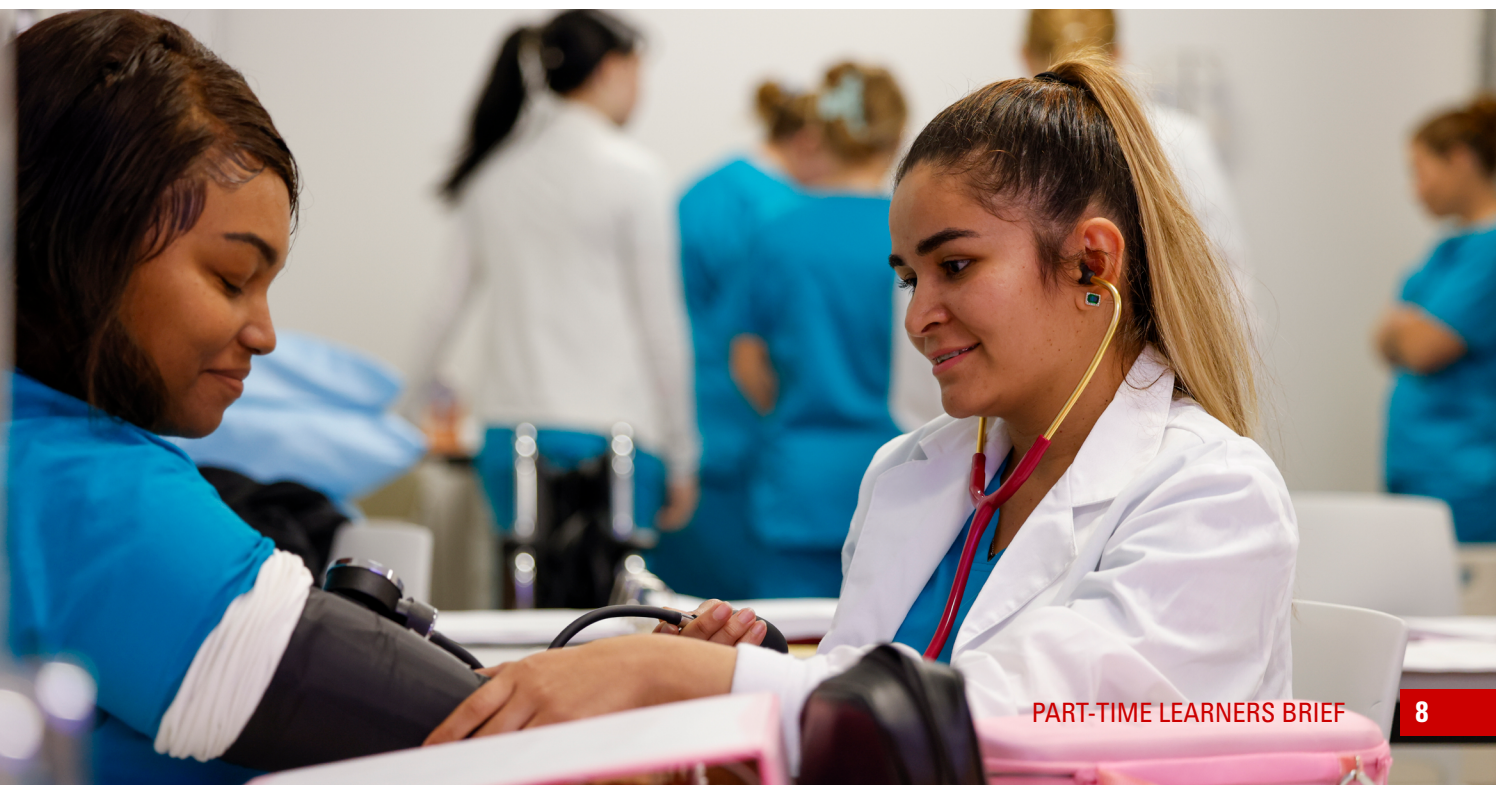
6. DESIGN NEW MODELS OF ENGAGEMENT AND INVITE PART-TIME UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS TO TAKE PART IN CAMPUS LIFE IN NEW AND DIFFERENT WAYS.

Part-time students in this research indicated that they did not typically participate in campus activities; however, they did have a strong desire to be more engaged in campus activities. Another way to show institutional support for part-time students is to design campus activities, experiences, and programming with their schedules and needs in mind. Rather than assuming part-time students are uninterested in participating in such activities, or putting the burden on these students to engage in existing programs not truly designed for them, campus leaders should explore new opportunities to engage students and meet their needs. Some examples include facilitating spaces for the students to connect with other part-time learners and incorporating family members and other key support systems into campus life. For part-time students who are also adult learners, familial engagement plays an important role in student persistence and completion. Campuses can enhance programming and communication surrounding events and activities to be inclusive of family members and by reducing barriers to access and participation, such as by lowering the cost to attend an event. Additionally, institutions can create an orientation or workshop series that provide insights to family members and supporters that illuminate challenges that part-time students may encounter and how to best provide support. By investing in part-time student interests and designing flexible formats and modes they can participate in, institutions add value to the part-time student experience and cultivate a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

As college demographics change and the educational landscape continues to shift, changes need to be made at the campus, system, state, and federal level to accommodate a variety of diverse learners. The recommendations listed above, based on findings from a case study of 23 part-time undergraduate students, can help policymakers and campus leaders make strides forward in supporting the part-time student population to improve persistence and degree completion rates. Based on research showing that part-time students are at a disadvantage for degree attainment compared to full-time students, this is important work. To better support part-time student needs, leaders must seek to understand the unique experiences and challenges of this population—not merely lumping them together with "nontraditional" students—as well as the institutional policies and practices that aid and hinder their success. Additionally, the recommendations above can help North Carolina leaders boost college enrollment to reach its 2030 enrollment goal and meet critical workforce needs.

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FURTHER READING

- Mincing Words: Nontraditional is the new traditional
- First-Year, Nontraditional Student Retention at Four-Year Institutions: How Predictors of Attrition Vary Across Time
- New Data Highlight How Higher Education Is Failing Part-Time Students
- More Than 50 Percent of Students Beginning College Part Time in 2013 Left College Without Earning a Credential Six Years Later, According to New Research Report