



Texas Schools Project and Texas Success Center

Research Opportunity: Greater Texas Foundation Study of Part-Time College Students

Summary

The majority of community college students enroll part-time. Despite this, evidence is lacking on how to effectively improve college attainment for part-time students. This mixed methods study addresses this research gap by developing a more complete understanding of the part-time student population, particularly temporary part-time students, their challenges and needs, as well as the types of interventions and programs that might support their persistence and completion. This study, situated in Texas, is made up of two components. The quantitative component of the study leverages student-level administrative data to describe the characteristics of part-time students enrolled in Texas community colleges; characterize enrollment shifts within the part-time student population; and identify factors that promote successful transitions—such as from stop-out to re-enrollment, or part-time status to full-time status—and timely college completion. The qualitative component of the study will focus on unearthing the reasons why students enroll part time, the barriers that prevent them from enrolling full-time, and the supports they need to complete college. Data for the qualitative component will be collected online in Fall 2022-Spring 2023 from 10 community colleges and consist of an institutional survey, an administrator focus group, student surveys, student interviews and student focus groups. Findings and policy implications will be shared with Texas college leaders and administrators through various means.

Background

Research demonstrates that part-time college students time have poorer academic outcomes than full-time students (Bombardieri, Hatton, & Slatter, 2017). Just over a third of students who attend part-time at any point in time earned a degree within six years, compared with 80 percent of those who exclusively enroll full-time (Shapiro, Dunbar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Bhimdiwala, 2017). Familial responsibilities and childcare needs, limited access to on-campus resources, and failure to gain early credit momentum are some of the reasons researchers cite to explain these differences (Bombardieri, 2017; Jenkins & Bailey, 2017; Le, Pisacreta, Ward, Margolis, & Booth, 2020). Yet, despite these diverse explanations, the principal policy response to this problem is to encourage students to enroll full time. This response is reflected in eligibility rules for many federal and state policies and evidence-based student success strategies, including the federal Pell program and CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associates Programs (ASAP).

While evidence shows that full-time enrollment is positively correlated with college completion (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2017), we believe that requiring community college students to enroll full time may make it harder them to pursue and complete college. Despite making benefits contingent on full-time enrollment, large numbers of community college students nevertheless enroll part-time and encounter persistent or temporary barriers that prevent them from matriculating full time, accessing needed supports, and succeeding in college. This is particularly concerning given that part-time students are disproportionately first-generation, economically disadvantaged, working adults, parents or of color (Shapiro, Dunbar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Bhimdiwala, 2017). Developing postsecondary support models that meet the academic and non-

academic needs of part-time students is critical in efforts that aim to close equity gaps in higher education

The absence of guidance on what support models for part-time students should look like is tied to the paucity of nuanced research on this student population. Most studies examining part-time students center on documenting their demographic characteristics and outcomes (Campbell & Bombardieri, 2017; Shapiro, Dunbar, Huie, Wakhungu, Yuan, Nathan, & Bhimdiwala, 2017; Stout, 2018), but very few take into account the dynamic nature of part-time enrollment. Indeed, to facilitate descriptive analyses, researchers have tended to treat part-time status as fixed and constant, characterizing students as part-time if they enroll in anything less than 12 credit hours at any time during their college career (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020, Belfield, Jenkins, & Lahr, 2016). Yet, evidence shows that enrollment intensities vary tremendously over the course of a student's college career, with the COVID-19 pandemic having a notable impact on continuous enrollment. Which students are more likely to enroll part-time persistently or temporarily? Which factors motivate students to enroll part-time? To what extent does a shift to part-time enrollment correlate with stop-out or drop-out? How are community colleges supporting students who need to enroll part-time because of an unexpected hardship to ensure that these students make steady progress toward completion? And to what extent are these supports helping part-time students cross the finish line?

Study Approach

This mixed methods study, funded by the Greater Texas Foundation, will begin to address these questions by accurately characterizing the enrollment patterns of part-time students and deepening our understanding of the environments in which they live. Data collected from this study will help colleges to design support programs that meet the academic and non-academic needs of meet the needs of part-time students to increase their chances of completing college. The quantitative component will use student-level administrative data to describe the characteristics of part-time students at Texas community colleges; characterize enrollment shifts within this student population; and identify factors that promote successful transitions from stopout or part-time status to full-time status and timely completion.

We will also conduct a qualitative study that examines the reasons why students enroll part time, the barriers that prevent them from enrolling full-time, and the supports they need to complete college while attending part-time. Specifically, the research team will collect data from administrators from ten Texas community colleges who represent a diversity of institutional characteristics present in the state. Data collected will help shed light on (a) how administrators and staff identify students who could potentially enroll full-time and actively encourage them to do so; (b) reasons why they think students enroll part-time and have lower rates of success; (c) resources, services, and programs that are available to part-time students, and (d) how they would envision changing current policy and practice to better serve this student population. Focus groups will pay particular attention to differences in challenges and associated needs for temporary vs. persistent part-time students. At four of these colleges, the research team will also collect data from part-time students to understand: (a) the factors influencing part-time enrollment; (b) the challenges and needs of part-time students as they pursue college completion; and (c) resources, services, or programming part-time students have found helpful in supporting their success in college.

We will begin data collection starting in Fall 2022. Colleges selected to participate in the study will be required to complete a 15-minute online survey, on the part of a university administrator, and assist with recruiting administrators to engage in an online focus group. Finally, participation will require colleges to commit to supporting the research team's efforts to collect student data as well in the form of online surveys, interviews and focus groups in Spring 2023 if they are selected for inclusion. This work would entail supporting recruitment efforts, such as posting flyers to social media accounts, and sending emails to students who are registered part-time to inform about the study.

Products and Dissemination

A report and a policy brief documenting the study’s findings and policy implications will be released in late Fall 2023. The research team will work with TACC to disseminate findings from the study to Texas college leaders and administrators via an in-person learning session at the Texas Pathways Institute and a recorded webinar. This research will help to better characterize the population of part-time students at Texas community colleges, elevate the challenges they face, and identify where policy and practice reforms could be implemented to promote their success. While this proposed study will not be able to uncover causal evidence on the impact of particular success strategies or interventions, it has the potential to inform a new institutional approach for supporting part-time students. Moving forward, the research team is interested in working with colleges to develop, pilot and fine-tune promising strategies to support part-time students that emerge from this initial research effort.

Timeline

Table 1 shows the timeline for the remainder of the study, which began in December 2021 and will conclude in December 2023. Quantitative analysis is ongoing and will continue through the course of the study period. The research team has already developed protocols and recruitment material for the qualitative component of the study. The team will conduct focus groups with administrators in Fall 2022 and student interviews in Spring 2023. A final report will be released in Fall 2023.

Table 1: Timeline

| | 2022 | | 2023 | | | |
|----------------------------|------|----|------|----|----|-------|
| | Q3 | Q4 | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 | Q4 |
| Quantitative Analysis | X | X | X | X | X | |
| Administrator Focus Groups | X | X | | | | |
| Student Interviews | | | X | X | | |
| Reporting | | | | | | Final |

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