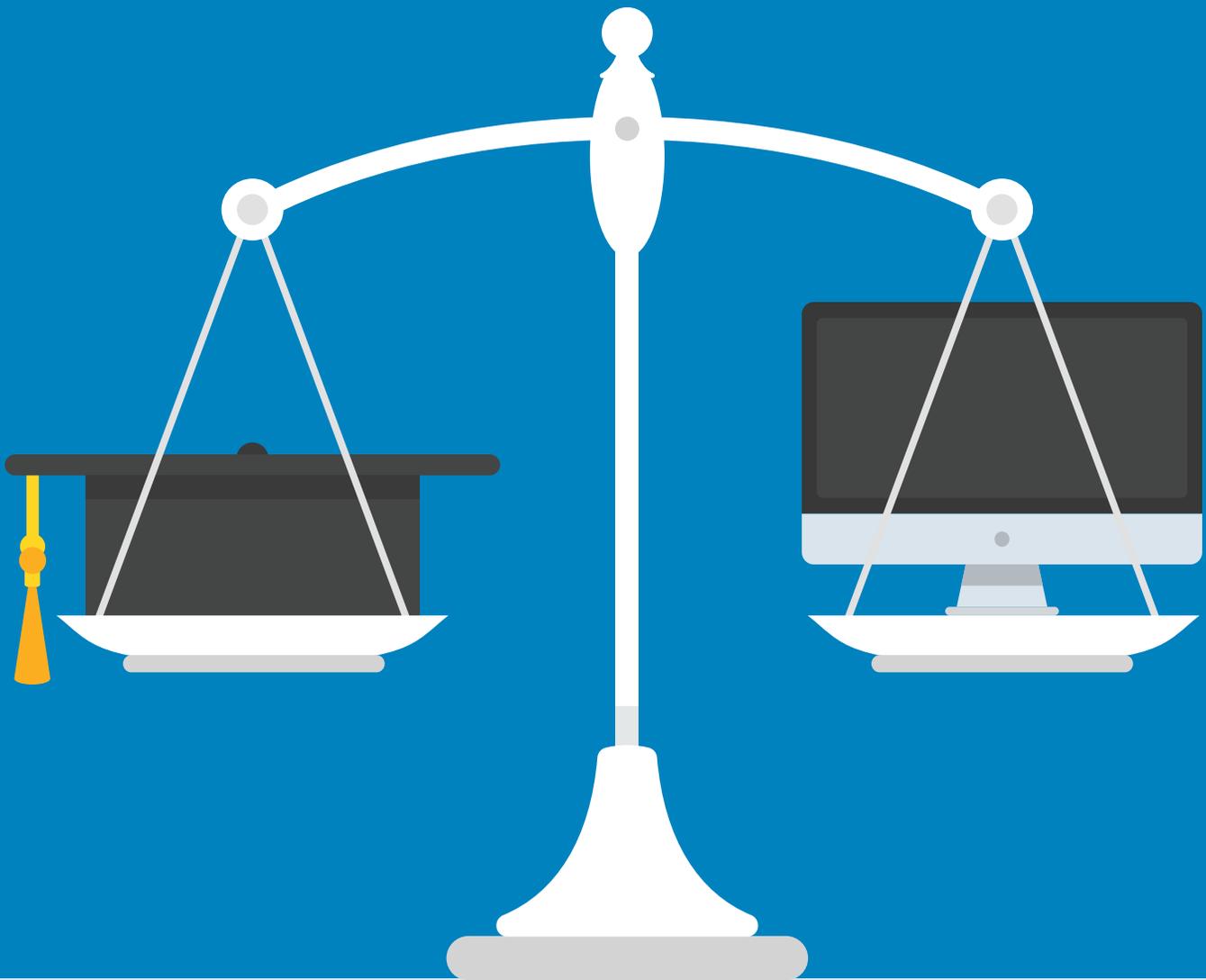


# THE COLLEGE-WORK BALANCING ACT



**ACCT**  
ASSOCIATION OF  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRUSTEES

Made possible by a grant from  **Guardian**



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ACCT is a non-profit educational organization of governing boards representing more than 6,500 elected and appointed trustees who govern over 1,100 community, technical, and junior colleges in the United States and beyond. These community professionals, business officials, public policy leaders, and leading citizens offer their time and talent to serve on the governing boards of this century's most innovative higher education institutions and make decisions that affect more than 13 million students annually. For more information about ACCT, visit [www.acct.org](http://www.acct.org).

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## INTRODUCTION

How can community colleges support students' goals of finding success in the workforce, both today and the future? This issue brief builds upon ACCT's previously published report *Partnerships for a Future-Ready Workforce*. This brief is the first in a four-part series that will further examine strategies through which community colleges can support students' efforts to achieve their career goals and meet the needs of local economies. Essential to community colleges' workforce development strategies is recognizing that today's students often simultaneously pursue academics and work. Many community college students work, either full- or part-time, while pursuing their degrees. Students have many reasons to work while pursuing their degrees; some of these reasons include earning money to pay for tuition and living expenses, supporting family, avoiding the opportunity cost of leaving the workforce, or wanting to gain new career experience.

This issue brief serves as a primer on the characteristics of working students and the supports community colleges can offer to ensure these students are able to attain a degree or credential. As this paper is specifically focused on students who work while enrolled, we simply refer to this population as students, except when comparing this population specifically to non-working students. In the first section, we provide nationwide data on the trends of the characteristics of the working student population and how they balance their time between school and work. In the second section, we discuss research on the factors relating to balancing school and work, in particular their time, academic performance, and finances. In the third section, we introduce the types of academic and non-academic supports that community colleges can offer to help students balance their responsibilities, with a focus on those that are: intended to better connect students' academics to their work, provide flexible scheduling options, and ease the challenge of balancing family responsibilities.

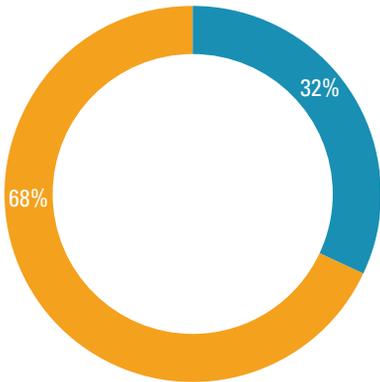
In addition, this paper includes three examples of institutions that offer supports for this population: Lakeshore Technical College's individualized-degree programs; Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College's flexible scheduling; and Austin Community College District's childcare programs. We chose these examples both to demonstrate a variety of academic and non-academic support programs that community colleges can offer for students who work and to illustrate how community colleges can partner with local employers and community-based organizations to meet the specific needs of working students.



# A NATIONAL LOOK AT WORKING STUDENTS

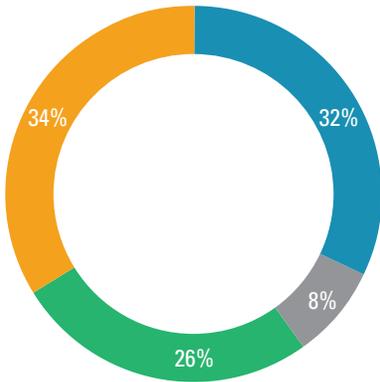
Working while pursuing degrees is the norm for community college students. Nationally representative data from the U.S. Department of Education National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) illustrates this trend and shows that as of 2016, over two-thirds of community college students work while enrolled.<sup>1</sup> Students may have various motivations for working, such as needing to pay the costs of tuition and living expenses not covered by financial aid; providing financial support to their family; or wanting to gain career experience. Despite the many potential motivations, data shows that most students throughout the country who work have unmet financial need and have jobs that are unrelated to their college majors. This suggests that their decisions to work are primarily motivated by financial need rather than by gaining career experience. Below are additional data on community college students' work patterns and behaviors.

**Public 2-year students working while enrolled**



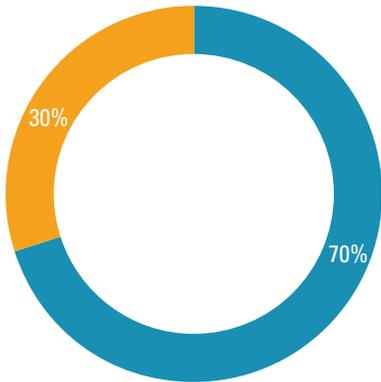
■ Not Working ■ Working

**Public 2-year students hours worked per week**



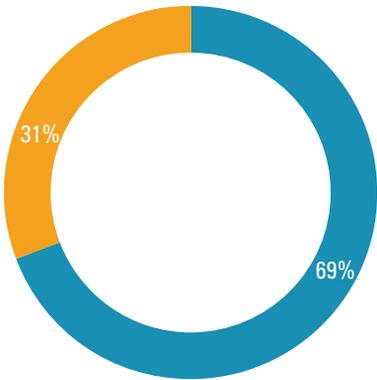
■ Zero ■ 1 to 15 ■ 16 to 30 ■ 31 and over

**Are community college students' jobs related to their fields of study?**



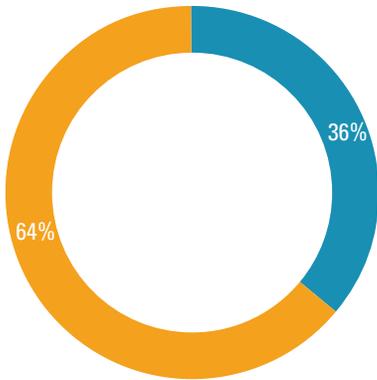
■ No ■ Yes

**Public 2-year students' primary roles**



■ A student working to meet expenses  
■ An employee who decided to enroll in school

**Public 2-year working students' unmet financial need**



■ No Unmet Need ■ Has Unmet Need

Trends of the percentage of community college students who work while enrolled also vary by demographic characteristics. Students most likely to have jobs while enrolled include females (70%), White students (72%), and students between the ages of 24 to 29 (71%). Independent students, particularly those with their own dependents (71%), are also more likely to work compared to dependent students (65%) and community college students overall (68%).<sup>2</sup>

PERCENTAGE OF PUBLIC 2-YEAR STUDENTS WHO HAD JOBS WHILE ENROLLED, '15-16		
	HAD NO JOB	HAD A JOB
All public 2-year students	32%	68%
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	35%	65%
Female	30%	70%
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>		
White	28%	72%
Black or African American	33%	67%
Hispanic or Latino	35%	65%
Asian	45%	55%
American Indian or Alaska Native	44%	56%
Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander	43%	57%
More than one race	36%	64%
<b>AGE</b>		
18 to 23	33%	67%
24 to 29	29%	71%
30 and over	32%	68%
<b>DEPENDENCY STATUS</b>		
Dependent	35%	65%
Independent without dependents	32%	68%
Independent with dependents	29%	71%

Working while pursuing degrees is the norm for community college students.

For students who work to pay for their college expenses, it is unlikely they will be able to work enough hours each year to cover the full costs of tuition and living expenses without sacrificing their academic progress.



## CHALLENGES TO PERSISTENCE

This section discusses several factors that affect the balancing of school and work responsibilities: time, academic performance, and finances. These factors impact students' academic success and progress toward degree completion. As discussed in this section, research indicates that challenges associated with working while earning a degree are even greater for low-income students and those who work long hours.

### Time

For students who balance coursework and a job—and among many community college students, family responsibilities—time can be a scarce commodity. Findings from a study of working students found that students must create highly structured schedules to manage their conflicting responsibilities. Based on information gathered during interviews and focus groups, researchers found that students manage their schedules either by dividing their weeks into dedicated days for either academics or work, or by dividing their days into segments dedicated to attending classes during one segment of the day and working during the other. While dividing their time is a necessity, the result is that many students face challenges such as having insufficient time to complete course assignments, increased stress, lack of sleep, and limited time to spend with family. These problems are especially acute for lower-income students who have less access to supports such as reliable childcare to help them balance responsibilities.<sup>3</sup>

### Academic Performance

While working can help students pay for tuition and living expenses, the added time burden can have a negative impact on their academic performance, especially for students who work more than a few hours each week. Researchers from the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce (CEW) analyzed national data and found that 61% of students who work fewer than 15 hours per week had a grade average of B or higher, while 47% of students who work more than 15 hours per week had an average of C or lower. Furthermore, for low-income students, working long hours can increase students' likelihoods of stopping out or not completing their degrees.<sup>4</sup> A study from the Community College Research Center also found negative academic consequences for community college students who work; however, the impacts of minimal increases in work (1-10 hours) were small.<sup>5</sup>

### Finances

As discussed in the previous section, data on students' working patterns suggests that earning money is the primary reason for students to work while enrolled, rather than gaining career experience related to their fields of study. According to the Georgetown CEW researchers, all students who work (both low-income and higher-income) are likely to work to cover their expenses.<sup>6</sup> Though working is common across the student income spectrum, there are key differences between low- and higher-income working students. Low-income working students are more likely to be Black or Hispanic and 30 years old or over. In comparison, higher-income working students are more likely to be White and under 30 years old. Furthermore, low-income students are more likely to work full-time hours.<sup>7</sup>

For students who work to pay for their college expenses, it is unlikely they will be able to work enough hours each year to cover the full costs of tuition and living expenses without sacrificing their academic progress. In 2018, the average price for public two-year college tuition and room and board was over \$12,000.<sup>8</sup> A student earning the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 would need to work an average of 32 hours per week to cover these expenses with earned income. Even students who receive financial aid to cover their tuition expenses would need to work an average of 23 hours per week with minimum-wage income. In this scenario, and in the absence of additional grant aid, research shows that community college students may be better off borrowing subsidized federal student loans rather than sacrificing the amount of time they can dedicate to their studies or prolonging the number of years it takes for them to earn their degree.<sup>9</sup> Findings from this study are in line with other research indicating that working long hours may lead to negative academic consequences.



## ACADEMIC AND NON-ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

This section introduces several types of student supports and strategies that community colleges can use to help students be successful even while balancing academic and work responsibilities. The support services included below help ease students' challenges related to time, finances, and academic performance. Furthermore, these supports are in line with national models to ensure working students persist and complete their degrees, such as Achieving the Dream's Working Students Success Network approach.<sup>10</sup>

### Work-based Learning

Work-based learning opportunities, such as paid internships and apprenticeships, have been gaining attention in the national dialogue about connecting postsecondary education to careers. In particular, leaders in the community college and business sectors are looking to grow apprenticeship programs to train students for careers in growing white-collar industries, including the financial sector, information technology, and health care.<sup>11</sup> By partnering with businesses to create paid work-based learning opportunities and matching students with opportunities in their respective fields of study, colleges can better help students secure jobs related to their fields of study and gain career experience while pursuing their degrees.

### Prior Learning Assessments

Prior learning assessments (PLA) allow students to gain academic credit from previous learning and work experiences—such as through the evaluation of work portfolios, resumes, and education mastery exam scores. These experiences can range from on-the-job training or military service to even volunteer experiences. When postsecondary institutions award credit for prior learning, students can save time and money by avoiding duplicative coursework needed to complete their degrees. According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), students who earn PLA credits persist through and complete their programs at a higher rate than students who do not.<sup>12</sup>

### Flexible Scheduling

When possible, community colleges can create flexible scheduling options to broaden access for students seeking to enroll in classes that fit their work schedules. This can include adding more classes on evening and weekends and increasing availability of online courses. Academic counselors can also help students create block schedules that reduce the number of days per week they need to come to campus. Other types of flexible scheduling include alternative term and course start dates and accelerated schedules.<sup>13</sup> Flexible scheduling is also important for student support services. Working students may not be able to access support services during traditional 9am-5pm business hours and could benefit from extended availability during mornings, evenings, or weekends.

### Childcare

Students with dependent children are likely to work to financially support their families, and one of their mostly costly expenses is likely to be childcare. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, the median cost of center-based childcare is over \$10,000 per year.<sup>14</sup> Community colleges can support these students by providing on-campus childcare options or partnering with local childcare providers. Colleges can leverage multiple sources of funding, such as federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) grants or state-based Child Care and Development Block Grant programs.



## LAKESHORE TECHNICAL COLLEGE INDIVIDUALIZED DEGREES<sup>15</sup>

Lakeshore Technical College (LTC) in Wisconsin serves many working students with unique interests and goals. To support these students' efforts to advance in their fields most efficiently, LTC employs the Individualized Technical Studies Program (ITS). The ITS associate degree program is aimed at helping students to advance their careers through degree attainment in program areas that do not already exist at the college. Students who pursue an ITS degree usually have at least some prior postsecondary education, in addition to work experience. A common example is a student who has experience in a skilled trade or manufacturing seeking to learn the business or administrative side of the profession, such as by earning a degree in accounting. In this scenario, that student could work with LTC to develop an individualized program that focuses on accounting specifically for advanced manufacturing.

The ITS program is designed to be nimble and customizable. A student can go from having an idea for a degree to having a course plan in one to two weeks. Since many ITS students have prior education and work experience, LTC helps them translate their existing knowledge toward formal degree requirements. They can earn credits for prior learning from experiences such as formal education, employer training, or military experience towards up to 75% of their ITS degree requirements. To accommodate students' work schedules, the program offers flexible and blended learning options, such as online, evening, and weekend courses.

Even though flexibility is central to the degree program, quality is of the utmost importance to the college. Students work with occupational mentors throughout the planning and learning stages. A faculty member and a dean with expertise in the subject area also oversee each course of study. Furthermore, every program undergoes a quality-review process to assess students' satisfaction, academic performance, semester-to-semester retention, and post-graduation outcomes.

Due to the unique nature of the program, it is relatively small compared to other programs LTC offers: 28 students graduated between 2014 and 2018. However, ITS programs spearheaded by students and employers have led to the creation of new degrees at LTC. For example, the ITS radioactive materials program has expanded into a full radioactive safety and health physics degree program as the result of a student's ITS creation. Despite the low enrollment, the college believes that the program has potential for growth based upon its valuable design. The creation of new programs is driven by both student interest and employer demand. Both can lead to new courses of study at any time.

**The ITS associate degree program is aimed at helping students to advance their careers through degree attainment in program areas that do not already exist at the college.**



## **SOUTHCENTRAL KENTUCKY COMMUNITY AND TECHNICAL COLLEGE FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING<sup>16</sup>**

When students were having difficulty meeting the demands of their employers and their educations simultaneously, Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College (SKYCTC) took notice. A challenge of working and pursuing a degree simultaneously is that work schedules and traditional academic schedules are often in conflict. This led SKYCTC to develop the SKY FLEX program, which provides flexible scheduling and allows students to fulfill part of their degree requirements with online learning.

It took one year to develop the SKYFLEX program, from the initial idea to creating the online content to launch. SKYCTC started by creating an online format for which all degree programs could eventually be offered. SKYCTC's goal for SKYFLEX was to create an online learning platform without sacrificing quality; to improve access and retention; and to recognize that students who take courses online are often the ones who need the most support for academic success. Thus, the program uses an online-learning model that goes beyond pre-recorded lectures. Students participate in virtual lab simulations and interactive content to become immersed in content before coming to their weekly classes on campus. Furthermore, all students in the program have access to on-campus supports, including academic tutoring, extended lab periods, and career counseling. Strategies used to ensure students have access include stacking services and extending hours every Monday.

SKYFLEX was initially offered for industrial maintenance technology, engineering and electronics technology, and electronics technology degree programs. The model has since been expanded to welding and HVAC programs. While further expansion is likely to continue, SKYCTC must work to ensure that staff are trained to use the new technology, and that new content is developed in step with new programs. Both take a substantial amount of time. Faculty tend to be more accustomed to in-person teaching, and so the transition to online learning can be a challenge.

The SKYFLEX program is also offered in conjunction with SKYCTC's initiative to serve working adult students who participate in the GED+ program. The GED+ program is a partnership with the statewide Kentucky Skills U and Kentucky Work Ready Scholarship program that allows students to simultaneously earn a GED and a college certificate in high-demand fields, such as healthcare, advanced manufacturing, and information technology—tuition free. GED+ programs typically can be completed in four months or fewer and students have access to the SKYFLEX online platform.

**SKYCTC's goal for SKYFLEX was to create an online learning platform without sacrificing quality; to improve access and retention; and to recognize that students who take courses online are often the ones who need the most support for academic success.**



## AUSTIN COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTRICT CHILDCARE PROGRAMS<sup>17</sup>

Across the Austin Community College (ACC) District, leaders and administrators are well versed in the need to meet students where they are at. Approximately 80% of ACC students work and 80% attend part-time. This means that support services must be tailored to meet a variety of student schedules and cannot be based on a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

For many of ACC’s working and part-time students, finding convenient, affordable childcare is essential to their academic success. To support students who have childcare needs, ACC offers three options: 1) childcare scholarships coupled with wraparound support services for students with a zero expected family contribution (EFC); 2) the ACC Children’s Lab School that includes evening care; and 3) drop-in care offered in partnership with a local YMCA. The decision to offer these three programs was the result of a two-year community-wide committee charged to evaluate ACC’s childcare options. Offering childcare scholarships was important to the committee in order to provide the greatest possible flexibility for low-income student parents to pay for childcare at a local provider that best meets the needs of their academic and work schedules. ACC’s board of trustees also found value in offering campus-based care for students who take night courses or who only need occasional services while they are in class.

One challenge of subsidizing childcare is the expense to the college. For campus budgeting, childcare also may not be a high priority because there are relatively few students who use the programs in comparison to the overall student body. Across all three programs, ACC serves about 300 students per semester. For students who need affordable childcare, having access to subsidized programs can be the difference between their continued enrollment and stopping out. Currently, ACC tracks the persistence rates of students who receive child-care scholarships. These students have a semester-to-semester persistence rate of approximately 5% higher than that of all students.

ACC leverages multiple funding sources to overcome the challenge of limited resources and to ensure childcare programs are sustainable over the long term. The childcare scholarship program is funded through a combination of the colleges’ federal Perkins Career and Technical Education grants and additional institutional resources. The evening-care program is supported by funding from the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program. Drop-in childcare is supported by a partnership with the YMCA, where ACC provides in-kind space on campus and the YMCA pays for all operating expenses.

Even though childcare programs can be expensive, ACC leaders see them as worthwhile investments. By prioritizing childcare and other wraparound services, ACC is able to better serve many of their highest need students, especially those who are very low-income or have experienced poverty. These services are essential to the college’s social equity mission and student-centric approach. Several ACC trustees continue to be interested in expanding on-site childcare to all 11 campuses in the district.

**For students who need affordable childcare, having access to subsidized programs can be the difference between their continued enrollment and stopping out.**



## CONCLUSION

Working while enrolled is the norm for community college students. Nationally, nearly 70% of community college students work in addition to taking classes. For most of these students, working is necessary to pay for their tuition and living expenses; however, it is unlikely that students with low-wage jobs will be able to earn enough to cover their full costs of attendance. Furthermore, for most students it is unlikely that their jobs will help them gain experience related to their courses of study—only 30% of students hold jobs related to their fields of study.

An added cost of working is the significant time burden placed on students, which can lead to challenges in balancing their academic and family responsibilities. This is especially true for low-income students, who are more likely to work longer hours to pay for expenses not covered by financial aid. To help ensure that work does not get in the way of students persisting and completing their degrees, colleges must implement support services that address students' needs related to time, finances, and academics.

In this brief, we chose to highlight academic models at Lakeshore Technical College and Southcentral Kentucky Community and Technical College that recognize the unique needs of working students. The first offers specialized academic programs to meet students' career goals, and the second offers flexible scheduling for students who are unable to be on campus every day of the week. We also chose to highlight childcare services at Austin Community College that are well suited to meet the needs of students' various schedules and offer affordable childcare options for low-income students.

While there may be no one silver bullet to ensure student success for all working students, the combination of academic and non-academic supports can help students to overcome the challenges of limited time and finances, and to enable strong academic performance. When it is necessary for students to work while enrolled, colleges' commitments to supporting the success of their students obligate them whenever possible to help make these work experiences meaningful and to tailor their campus environments so that they accommodate the realities of students' lives.

**When it is necessary for students to work while enrolled, colleges' commitments to supporting the success of their students obligate them whenever possible to help make these work experiences meaningful and to tailor their campus environments so that they accommodate the realities of students' lives.**



## ENDNOTES

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