

Today's News

Thursday, June 28, 2007

Part-Time Students Are at an Educational Disadvantage, Federal Report Says

By [PAULA WASLEY](#)

Students who attend college part time are at a disadvantage relative to their full-time peers, according to a report released on Wednesday by the National Center for Education Statistics, an arm of the U.S. Department of Education.

The report analyzes data from a 2004 national postsecondary student-aid study to create a profile of part-time undergraduate students and determine the relationship between part-time study and college persistence and degree attainment. The researchers found that, even controlling for factors such as gender, family income, and educational expectations, part-time students lagged behind full-timers in both areas.

According to the [report](#), "Part-Time Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education: 2003-4," 35 percent of undergraduates during the 2003-4 academic year attended college on an exclusively part-time basis.

Compared with their full-time counterparts, those students tended to be older, financially independent, and first-generation students. They were also more likely to be female, Hispanic, and less academically prepared, to come from low-income families, and to have lower educational expectations than full-time students.

A majority of part-time students attended two-year institutions -- as compared with 25 percent of full-time students -- and were enrolled in associate-degree or nondegree programs. Eighty-three percent worked while enrolled. Of those, more than half worked full time, and 47 percent considered themselves employees first and students second, the study found.

Researchers also profiled a subset of part-time students who, demographically speaking, "looked" like full-timers -- that is, they were 23 years old or younger, were financially dependent on their parents, and graduated from high school with a regular diploma. Students in that subset -- who made up 25 percent of the part-time population -- were more likely to come from high-income families, to have well-educated parents, and to expect to earn an advanced degree. They were also more likely than other part-time students to be white and male.

Like other part-time students, they were more likely to attend two-year colleges and enroll in nondegree or subbaccalaureate programs.

Unlike their part-time peers, however, the full-time look-alikes tended to place a greater importance on study than on work. Twenty-one percent worked full time while enrolled, and only 11 percent identified themselves primarily as employees.

Still, for both groups, an analysis of data from a separate longitudinal study indicated that part-time enrollment correlated negatively with academic outcomes.

Researchers found that, in a representative sample of undergraduates who entered college in 1995 and attended exclusively on a part-time basis, only 15 percent had completed a degree or certificate by the end

of six years, and none had attained a bachelor's degree. Seventy-three percent had left college without earning a degree, and 46 percent had left within their first year of study.

By comparison, among the full-time students in the longitudinal study, 64 percent had earned either a degree or a certificate by the end of six years, and 44 percent had earned a bachelor's degree. Seventy-two percent of the full-time students persisted with their studies, either by earning a degree within six years or by remaining enrolled.

The part-time students who resembled full-timers came in somewhere in the middle. Although they tended to fare better academically than other part-time students, they were less successful than full-time students at earning a degree. At the end of the six-year study, 45 percent had attained either a degree or a certificate, and 25 percent had earned bachelor's degrees.

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2 Kinds of Part-Time Students

[A report](#) released Wednesday by the U.S. Education Department provides a detailed look at the characteristics of part-time college students — and most of the results won't surprise those who work with these students. Compared to full-time students, part timers are more likely to be older, female, Hispanic, financially independent of their parents, first-generation college students, and to lag in graduation and retention rates.

But if those findings won't shock anyone, the department statistics also presented data that may challenge assumptions about part-time students.

About 25 percent of part-time students can be identified as those who “looked like typical full-time students” — and by looked like, the report was talking about demographics, not appearance. The characteristics: they are 23 or younger, they are financially dependent on their parents and receive parental help with college costs, and they received regular high school diplomas. Compared to other part-time students, this group is more likely to be white, to come from wealthy families, and to expect to eventually earn an advanced degree. Compared to full-time students, this group is more likely to be Hispanic, less likely to be black, and more likely to come from families with college degrees.

In terms of enrollment patterns, part-time students are much more likely than full-time students to attend community colleges — and to not ever receive a degree. Those in the “looked like full-time student” category are in the middle in terms of where they enroll.

Student Enrollment Breakdown, 2003-4

Type of Student	Public 4-Year	Private 4-Year	Public 2-year	More than 1 institution	Other
Full timers	37.3%	18.8%	25.2%	6.4%	12.4%
Part timers who look like fulltimers	33.7%	8.5%	44.0%	11.4%	2.4%
Other part timers	19.6%	8.4%	58.3%	7.6%	6.2%

The data in the report also show that students who are part timers with full-time characteristics are significantly more likely than other part timers to earn a degree. The following table is based on highest

degree earned through 2001 by students who started their postsecondary programs in 1995-6.

Degree Attainment by Enrollment Status

Enrollment Status	Earned Bachelor's Degree	Earned Associate Degree	Earned Certificate	No Degree or Certificate
Exclusively full time	43.7%	8.3%	12.4%	35.6%
Part-timer who look like full-timers	25.0%	13.6%	6.8%	54.6%
Other part-timers	6.9%	9.7%	16.9%	66.5%

Several experts said that the idea of looking at part-time students not as a single group, but as at least two defined subgroups, made sense and could have important policy implications.

Clifford Adelman, a longtime Education Department researcher who is now a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy (and who reviewed an early version of the report while in his previous job), said that the data show the importance of “recognizing all the differences” among groups. Some analysts assume that part-time enrollment is somehow a problem, but Adelman said it was important to remember that many people are making rational decisions based on their circumstances.

For plenty of traditional age undergraduates, for some combination of educational or personal reasons, taking 15 credits a semester isn't going to work, Adelman said. “Some of these students are being realistic,” and it shouldn't bother people if they take longer to graduate. “I'm not worried about the way students move through higher education, but that they are getting through.”

Deborah A. Santiago, vice president for policy and research at *Excelencia* in Education, which studies and promotes the interest of Latino college students, said she was not surprised by the categorization of the subgroup of part-time students or the larger share of Latino students in that group.

Many Latino students are trying to replicate what they did in high school, she said, meaning that they will take courses, hold down a job, and live with their families. These students, many of whom could be admitted to colleges elsewhere, want to juggle a range of responsibilities and also to keep costs down, she said.

Santiago said that these data point to the importance of working on issues related to college completion, since many of those part-time students may attend community college, but not earn a bachelor's degree. For example, she said that students may equate sticker price with actual price. “We have not been as good as we should be in using financial aid that is available,” Santiago said.

The new analysis should be helpful, Santiago said, even if some trends should be change. “When we think about Latino students going to college, we need to get them where they are, but we need to think about policies to get them where they want to be.”

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

The original story and user comments can be viewed online at <http://insidhighered.com/news/2007/06/28/parttime>.