



Part Time, Full Potential

Strategies for Improving Outcomes for
Part-Time Learners

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July 14, 2026



Through research, collaboration, and innovation, Ithaka S+R informs policy, guides strategies, and builds evidence-based tools to broaden access to postsecondary education, improve student and workforce outcomes, and advance scholarship.

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Funding for this work was provided by Arnold Ventures.



Executive summary

Part-time students represent about one-quarter of all undergraduate students at four-year institutions and nearly two-thirds at two-year institutions, yet they complete credentials at roughly half the rate of their full-time peers. These gaps are driven primarily by constraints due to work schedules, caregiving obligations, and limited financial aid, rather than by student characteristics or motivation. Added to this, the systems meant to support postsecondary success are largely designed for students who can attend full time. Further, research on how to help part-time students attend, persist, and complete college is limited, and often focuses on initiatives that encourage part-time students to increase their credit loads or convert to full time attendance. As a result, a large and growing population of part-time students face structural barriers that limit their success.

The systems meant to support postsecondary success are largely designed for students who can attend full time.

To identify areas where focused research and practice reforms could have the greatest impact, Ithaka S+R conducted a comprehensive mixed-methods study, drawing on descriptive analysis of publicly available data, a literature review and policy scan, and interviews with higher education experts. The study, supported by Arnold Ventures, had two goals: to deepen understanding of who part-time learners are and what shapes their enrollment and outcomes, and to identify where targeted investment in rigorous causal research has the greatest potential to improve those outcomes. Our analysis identified five overlapping characteristics that consistently differentiate part-time students from their full-time peers: they are more likely to work full time, be adult learners, attend public two-year institutions, enroll exclusively online, and be parents.

Part-time enrollment decisions reflect the intersection of personal circumstances and institutional and state policy. Part-time students are significantly more likely to be financially independent, to work long hours and to have dependents than their full-time peers. However, federal and state financial aid systems, course scheduling practices and credit-

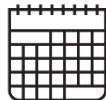
transfer policies remain poorly aligned with these realities. These structural constraints keep part-time students from maintaining the momentum necessary for completion.

Despite the scale and importance of this population, rigorous causal evidence on what works for part-time students remains limited. The report identifies six focus areas where the evidence base is promising, and where causal research is most likely to generate actionable evidence to inform policy and practice.



#1 Comprehensive wraparound support

Comprehensive programs that bundle multiple interventions such as financial assistance, tutoring, and advising show the strongest causal evidence for improving persistence and completion. CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) nearly doubled three-year graduation rates and has been replicated at more than 69 institutions, but the model requires full-time enrollment. Early adaptations for part-time students, including Nashville Flex and Part-Time SAIL, show descriptive promise, but no published causal evidence yet exists. New research should test whether comprehensive support models can be effectively adapted for part-time students and which program elements drive outcomes.



#2 Flexible course scheduling and delivery

Traditional semester structures with daytime offerings and term-by-term registration conflict with part-time students' work and caregiving schedules. Innovative scheduling approaches such as accelerated course formats, annual scheduling, and block scheduling may address these frictions. Quasi-experimental evidence finds that condensed course formats improve persistence and completion, but the same research finds lower performance in subsequent courses, raising questions about whether completion gains reflect durable learning. New research should examine the effects of flexible approaches to course scheduling and delivery on long-run outcomes and identify which student populations benefit the most.



#3 Expanded degree pathways to account for prior learning

Many part-time learners bring relevant knowledge and skills acquired through prior work, military service, or industry credentials that could substitute for coursework at their current institution. Only 11 percent of students use credit for prior learning despite its availability at 82 percent of institutions, largely due to unclear and costly validation processes. One causal study found meaningful effects of receiving credit through standardized exams like the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) on associate degree completion, but evidence supporting most other models is primarily descriptive. Further evidence is needed to identify the causal effects of other credit for prior learning modalities on postsecondary and labor market outcomes and test whether system-level policy reform increases uptake.



#4 Career-focused supports and employer-connected pathways

For students whose enrollment is tied directly to employment goals, interventions that make postsecondary education more immediately relevant to career advancement may sustain motivation and momentum. Career-aligned advising, employer partnerships, and structured work-based learning may hold promise for part-time students. New research should examine the effects of employer-connected programs and career-aligned advising on credential attainment and earnings, and test whether career supports amplify the effects of comprehensive support models.



#5 Access to public benefits

Most eligible part-time students do not access Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and other public benefits that could reduce work hours and support persistence due to limited awareness, administrative burden, and stigma. The causal evidence is mixed: one California study showed meaningful effects of SNAP receipt on persistence, while a randomized evaluation of Single Stop, a national nonprofit that helps college students navigate and apply for public benefits found no detectable impacts on student outcomes primarily because of low program uptake. New research should identify which outreach and enrollment strategies are most effective for improving uptake by part-time students.



#6 Expanded access to state financial aid

Part-time students are less likely to receive financial aid than their full-time peers despite greater need, leading them to work longer hours and take longer to complete degrees. There is considerable causal evidence that grant aid improves student outcomes, but less is known about which specific forms of aid most effectively serve part-time students. Recent reforms to include part-time learners in state-based programs—New York's expanded Part-Time TAP, Massachusetts's dedicated part-time grant, Virginia's G3 program—provide an opportunity to evaluate the impacts of aid expansion. New research should estimate the effect of expanded aid policies on persistence and completion, and test how impacts vary by aid design.

Introduction

Part-time students account for one-third to one-half of all undergraduates, yet they complete credentials at roughly half the rate of full-time peers and disproportionately belong to groups historically excluded from educational opportunity.¹ These gaps are driven by a combination of personal, structural, and policy constraints. Personal financial challenges, including being more likely to experience basic needs insecurity and having competing obligations, can create financial strain for part-time students.² These financial realities can interact with limited financial aid options to make it difficult for part-time students to afford to enroll and persist.³ Moreover, course schedules and support services are usually designed for students who can participate in a full-time educational experience, and inconsistent policies for recognizing prior learning and transferring credit can make it challenging for part-time students to efficiently move toward degree attainment.⁴

Prior research and policy efforts on part-time learners have largely focused on incentivizing them to increase their credit loads or convert to

¹ Based on author's calculations using fall 2023 IPEDS, 2019-20 National Postsecondary Aid Study, and 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey.

² "2023–2024 Student Basic Needs Survey Report," *The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs*, Temple University, February 26, 2025, <https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey/2023-2024-student-basic-needs-survey-report>.

³ To learn more about challenges related to financial aid and part-time students, see: "Enrollment Requirements in State Financial Aid: 50-State Analysis," Education Commission of the States, December 14, 2015, <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/EdBeat-enrollment-intensity-request-12142015-2.pdf>; Alexandria N. Ardisson, Sebastian Galindo, Allen F. Wysocki, Eric W. Triplett, and Jennifer C. Drew, "The Need for Equitable Scholarship Criteria for Part-Time Students," *Innovative Higher Education* 46, no. 4 (2021): 461-479, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09549-7>; "Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority," Complete College America, August 2022, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/part-time-students.pdf>.

⁴ "Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority," Complete College America, August 2022, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/part-time-students.pdf>; Wendy Kilgore, "Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusion: The 2024 Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning in U.S. and Canadian Higher Education," AACRAO, 2024, <https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/state-of-undergraduate-credit-for-prior-learning-report-v4.pdf>.

full-time status, as this is associated with higher completion rates.⁵ Although enrolling full time would improve their likelihood of completion, many learners have to enroll part time due to constraints related to work, finances, and caregiving obligations. There is limited evidence on effective policies and interventions for meeting the multidimensional needs of the many students who will study part time for all or most of their postsecondary experience.

To help address this gap, we conducted a comprehensive mixed-methods study, supported by Arnold Ventures, to deepen our understanding of who part-time learners are, how state and institutional policies shape enrollment intensity, and which targeted interventions show promise for improving part-time students' outcomes. Drawing on fall 2023 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data, we developed a set of part-time student "archetypes" by identifying key enrollment patterns and characteristics that distinguish part-time from full-time students: full-time employment, enrollment at public two-year institutions, adult learner status (age 25+), online program enrollment, and parenting or caregiving responsibilities. We complemented this data analysis with a literature review, policy scan, and informal conversations with higher education experts to identify effective policies and interventions.⁶ These activities were meant to be exploratory and create an entry point for stakeholders invested in bettering outcomes for part-time students.⁷

⁵ Evelyn Waiwaiole and Dhanfu Elston, "One Question: Can You Attend Full-Time, One Time?" *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 49, no. 6 (2017): 23-31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2017.1398998>; Center for Community College Student Engagement, "Even One Semester: Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success," The University of Texas at Austin, College of Education, Department of Educational Administration, Program in Higher Education Leadership, 2017, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED582827.pdf>.

⁶ We conducted informal interviews with seven individuals representing expertise from research, state policy, and institutional practice.

⁷ For more research related to part-time students, see: "Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority," Complete College America, August 2022, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/part-time-students.pdf>; Lena Novak, Claudia Escobar, Noor Amanullah, Makoto Toyoda, and Rebekah O'Donoghue, "Defining the Part-Time Student and Identifying Promising Practices: A Scan of Literature, Approaches, and Initiatives," MDRC, May 2025, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/defining-part-time-student-and-identifying-promising-practices>;

Based on the insights from these activities, this report provides an actionable guide for researchers and policymakers seeking to support part-time students. The report continues in three key sections. First, we describe the characteristics of part-time learners and where their needs are most concentrated. We then examine the interlocking realities that can impact part-time students' decisions related to enrollment and persistence, including state policy and institutional supports. We conclude with six key focus areas where we believe targeted investment in rigorous causal research has the greatest potential to improve outcomes for students who are likely to enroll part time. Because enrollment intensity is fluid, and the personal, structural, and institutional factors that determine part-time enrollment tend to persist across semesters, interventions that serve these sub-populations will reach part-time students more reliably than those that restrict eligibility to part-time students alone.

Who are part-time learners?

Part-time students are a large share of the undergraduate population, accounting for 33 percent of enrollment in fall 2023 and 49 percent of students across the full 2019-20 academic year.⁸ Yet they persist and complete credentials at far lower rates than their full-time peers. Students' enrollment intensity at entry is a strong predictor of later outcomes. Among students who began college in 2011-12, only 65 percent of those who started part time (conventionally defined as taking fewer than 12 credit hours per semester), returned the following year, compared to 86 percent of students who started full time.⁹ Across every entering cohort from 2008 to 2019, six-year completion rates for students who started part time have ranged between 30 and 34 percent, half the 60 to 68 percent rates for students who started full time.¹⁰ Further, we

⁸ Authors' calculations using fall 2023 IPEDS enrollment data and 2019-20 full year NPSAS survey data. Fall enrollment has remained stable at around 33 percent over the past two decades. The fall enrollment share does not include enrollment of students under 18 years old in an effort to remove the influence of dual enrollment students. This adjustment is not necessary for the NPSAS-derived statistic, as that survey samples only students who have graduated from high school.

⁹ Authors' calculations using the 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey.

¹⁰ "Yearly Progress and Completion," National Student Clearinghouse, <https://nscresearchcenter.org/yearly-progress-and-completion/>

see notable demographic differences in part-time students: 64 percent of students age 25 and older attend college part time, as do 64 percent of Black students and 68 percent of Hispanic students, compared to 48 percent of White students.¹¹

Table 1 presents student demographics by enrollment intensity. Compared to full-time students, part-time students are slightly more likely to be women (59 percent vs. 56 percent). Part-time students are also more likely to be Hispanic (24 percent vs. 19 percent) or Black (15 percent vs. 13 percent), and less likely to be White (46 percent vs. 50 percent) or Asian students (5 percent vs. 9 percent).

Table 1: Student demographics by enrollment intensity

Characteristic	All students	Full-time students	Part-time students
Gender			
Woman	57.0%	56.0%	59.1%
Man	43.0%	44.0%	40.9%
Race/Ethnicity			
Hispanic	21.1%	19.0%	23.7%
White	48.1%	49.8%	46.4%
Black	13.0%	12.6%	14.5%
Asian	8.0%	8.9%	5.4%
Multiracial	8.0%	8.1%	8.3%
American Indian or Alaska Native	1.0%	1.0%	1.0%
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.7%	0.5%	0.7%

Notes: Gender data are from Fall 2023 IPEDS; students under the age of 18 were excluded as a proxy for removing dual enrollment students. The enrollment share of men and women students sums to 100 percent because enrollment of students whose gender does not fall into either category is not reported by full- or part-time status. Race/ethnicity data are not broken down by both enrollment intensity and age in IPEDS, making it difficult to exclude dual enrollment students from race/ethnicity statistics. Instead, race/ethnicity data are from the 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS). Full time reflects students enrolled exclusively full time; part-time reflects students enrolled exclusively part time. The NPSAS sample is restricted to high school graduates, which addresses the exclusion of dual enrollment students.

¹¹ “Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority,” Complete College America, August 2022, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/part-time-students.pdf>.

Enrollment intensity is fluid. Many students shift between full-time and part-time enrollment over the course of their studies. For example, among the 2011-12 cohort, 23 percent of students enrolled exclusively full time in their first year shifted to part time or mixed enrollment in their second year, and 26 percent of those enrolled exclusively part time in their first year shifted to full time or mixed enrollment.¹² Additionally, few institutions serve part-time learners exclusively. For these reasons, the most comprehensive recent evidence on this population concludes that interventions need not be restricted to part-time students to benefit them.¹³ Rather, the most promising approaches will target student populations who are disproportionately likely to attend part time, even if they do not cater exclusively to part-time students.

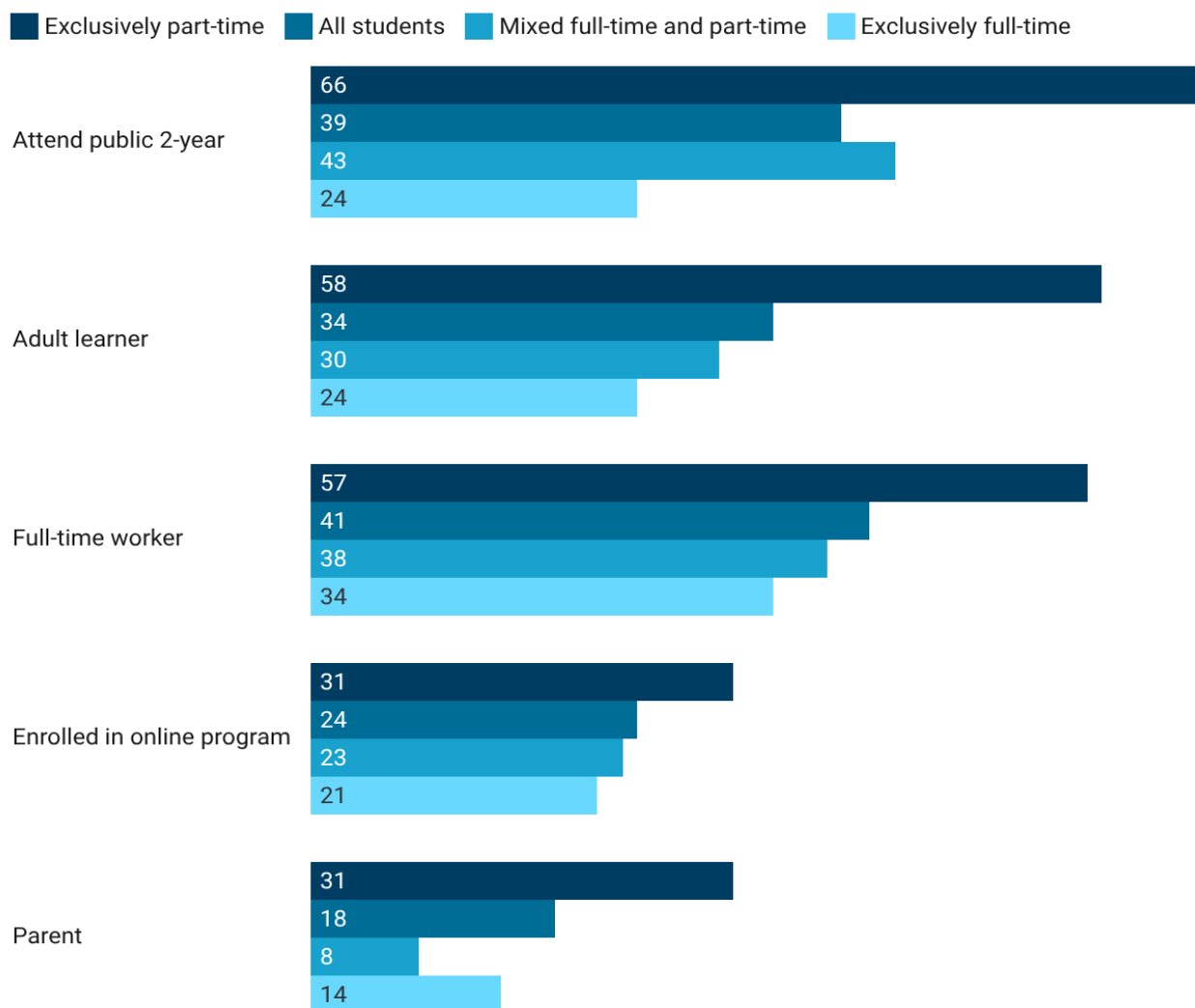
To identify the subgroups for whom targeted support might be most impactful, we developed a set of part-time student “archetypes.” Using fall 2023 IPEDS enrollment data and the nationally representative 2019-20 NPSAS, we compared the characteristics and experiences of part-time and full-time students and identified traits that were more prevalent among part-time students compared to their full-time peers. Our analysis yielded five key traits. Part-time students are more likely to work full time, attend public two-year institutions, and enroll in exclusively online programs. They are also more likely to be adults (age 25+) and parents. Figure 1 describes the prevalence of these key traits across undergraduate populations.

¹² Authors’ calculations using the 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey.

¹³ Lena Novak, Claudia Escobar, Noor Amanullah, Makoto Toyoda, and Rebekah O’Donoghue, “Defining the Part-Time Student and Identifying Promising Practices,” MDRC, 2025,

https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Promising_Practices_for_PT_Students.pdf.

Figure 1: Archetype characteristics are concentrated among exclusively part-time and mixed enrollment students



Created with Datawrapper

Notes: Data from 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS).

These characteristics and experiences are not mutually exclusive but represent multiple intersecting student identities. Table A.1 in the appendix shows the prevalence of all two-way archetype combinations across four student populations: all undergraduates, exclusively full-time students, exclusively part-time students, and students with mixed enrollment. Among exclusively part-time students, 38 percent are adult learners who work full time, 36 percent are adult learners who attend public two-year institutions, 20 percent are parents who work full time, and 19 percent are enrolled in an online program and work full time.

The prevalence of each characteristic helps frame where needs are concentrated and the potential scope of impact of a given intervention. For instance, Table 2 shows that students who attend part time and work full time make up nearly one-quarter of all undergraduates, suggesting that interventions targeting this group could reach a substantial share of the student body. Broader interventions that target all full-time workers, regardless of enrollment intensity, could still reach 57 percent of part-time students and 41 percent of all undergraduates.

Table 2: Summary of part-time archetypes

Trait	Share of all students	Share of exclusively part-time students	Share of all students that are part time and have given trait
Full-time worker	41%	57%	23%
Attend public two-year	22%	42%	14%
Adult learner	28%	50%	17%
Enrolled in online program	24%	31%	13%
Parent	18%	31%	12%

Notes: Data on the share of students who are full-time workers, are enrolled in exclusively online programs, and are parents, are from the 2019-20 NPSAS. Data on the share of students who attend public two-year institutions and are adult learners (25 years or older) are from fall 2023 IPEDS.

Dual enrollment students often study part-time and comprise an important segment of undergraduate enrollment. In 2022-23, high school students accounted for 12 percent of undergraduate enrollment and are likely to enroll part time.¹⁴ Among dual enrollees who go on to college after high school, the majority (51 percent) enroll at four-year institutions rather than community colleges (nearly one-third), and those who do attend community colleges complete credentials at far higher rates (49 percent) than typical part-time community college students.¹⁵ However, we exclude

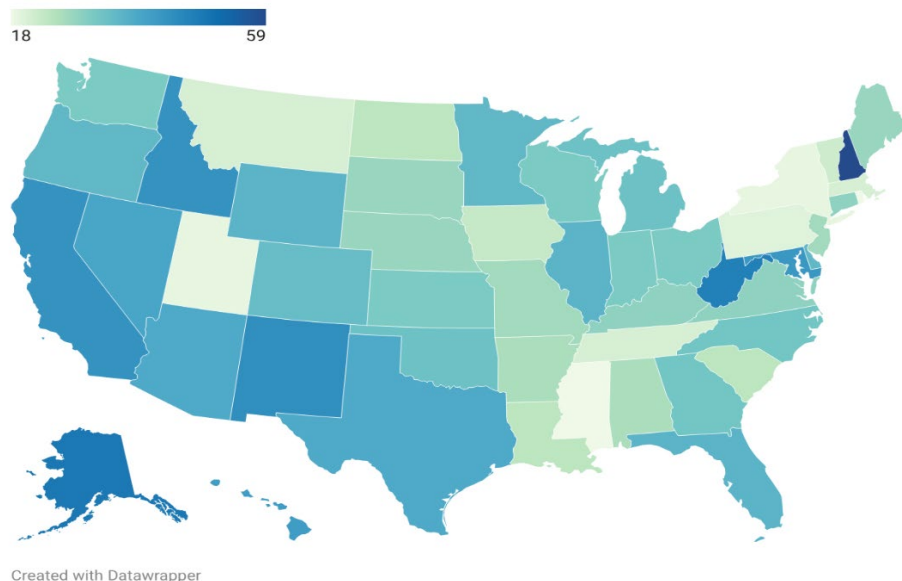
¹⁴ John Fink, “How Many Students Are Taking Dual Enrollment Courses in High School? New National, State, and College-Level Data,” *CCRC Blog*, August 26, 2024.

¹⁵ Tatiana Velasco, John Fink, Mariel Bedoya, and Davis Jenkins, “The Postsecondary Outcomes of High School Dual Enrollment Students: A National and State-by-State Analysis,” Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University, 2024, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED661434.pdf>.

them from our analysis because their postsecondary trajectories differ notably.¹⁶

While part-time students accounted for one-third of national fall 2023 enrollment, the prevalence of part-time enrollment varies considerably across states. Figure 2 presents a heat map illustrating the distribution of part-time enrollment shares across the United States in fall 2023. The share ranges from 18 percent of students in Mississippi and Rhode Island to 59 percent in New Hampshire, the only state where the majority of enrollment is part time. This variation reflects state-specific contexts. New Hampshire's outsized share, for instance, is likely driven by the prevalence of online study. Part-time students are more likely to enroll in exclusively online programs, and 79 percent of enrollment in New Hampshire institutions is online, almost entirely through Southern New Hampshire University.¹⁷

Figure 2: Part-time share of fall 2023 enrollment across US States



Notes: Data are from fall 2023 IPEDS. Students under age 18 are excluded from part-time share calculations to limit

¹⁶ Because IPEDS includes dual enrollment students but does not disaggregate their enrollment by intensity, we exclude students under age 18 from our fall 2023 IPEDS analyses as an imperfect proxy to limit their influence on the data. This adjustment is not necessary for NPSAS-derived statistics, as that survey samples only students who have graduated from high school.

¹⁷ Authors' calculations using fall 2023 IPEDS.

the influence of dual enrollment.

Despite the state-level variation in part-time enrollment shares, the five archetypes identified from national data hold across the vast majority of states, and each characteristic is more common among part-time students than among their full-time peers. The most prevalent archetype illustrates this well. Nationally, 57 percent of exclusively part-time students were employed full time during the 2019-20 academic year, compared to 41 percent of all undergraduates. At the state level, at least 50 percent of exclusively part-time students were also full-time workers in every state except California and Idaho. By contrast, only two states—Idaho and South Dakota—had a student population in which at least 50 percent of exclusively full-time students were also working full time. Table A.2 in the appendix shows the share of students who are also full-time workers by enrollment intensity for each state. A similar pattern holds for adult learners, public two-year institution enrollment, exclusive online program participation, and student parenthood, each of which are more prevalent among part-time students than among full-time students across nearly every state in the country.

What factors influence students' decisions to enroll part time and their experiences and outcomes once enrolled?

Students' decisions to enroll part time, and their subsequent experiences and outcomes are shaped by a combination of personal circumstances, institutional practices, and federal and state policy regulations. Part-time enrollment is generally associated with weaker persistence and completion outcomes than full-time attendance, yet many students cannot enroll full time due to their work schedules, family obligations, and financial constraints.¹⁸ Part-time enrollment decisions therefore reflect not just individual preferences, but responses to the social, structural and external constraints that students encounter as they navigate higher

¹⁸ Center for Community College Student Engagement, “Even One Semester: Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success,” The University of Texas at Austin, 2017; Evelyn Waiwaiole, and Dhanfu Elston, “One Question: Can You Attend Full-Time, One Time?” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 49, no. 6 (2017): 23–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2017.1398998>.

education systems.

Personal circumstances

Students who enroll part time typically face a combination of financial pressures, time constraints, and caregiving responsibilities that make full-time attendance difficult or impossible. Part-time students are more than twice as likely as their full-time peers to work 40 or more hours per week, and 62 percent of part-time students state that their jobs dictate their enrollment, compared to just 28 percent of full-time students.¹⁹ A 2025 national survey of undergraduates found that 68 percent worked while enrolled, and 42 percent agreed that it is important to support their family financially while in college—pressures that fall disproportionately on part-time students.²⁰ These financial demands are compounded by higher rates of basic needs insecurity: part-time students are more likely to experience food and housing instability even when working substantial hours.²¹

Part-time students are more likely to experience food and housing instability even when working substantial hours.

Beyond financial and time constraints, self-perception can also influence enrollment intensity for some students, particularly first-generation students or adult learners returning to college after a gap. These students may initially choose to engage cautiously due to uncertainty about their academic readiness, perceived differences from peers, and a limited sense of belonging to the college environment.²² Placement into

¹⁹ Marcella Bombardieri, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Part-Time College Students in America," *Center for American Progress*, 2017, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED665149.pdf>; "The Intersection of Work and Learning: Findings from a CCCSE National Study," *Center for Community College Student Engagement*, 2020, 5, <https://cccse.org/sites/default/files/WorkingLearner.pdf>.

²⁰ "Defining the Modern Learner: National Infographic," *Trellis Strategies*, 2026, https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/DefiningModernLearner_National-Infographic_2026.pdf.

²¹ Marcella Bombardieri, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Understanding Part-Time College Students in America," *Center for American Progress*, 2017, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED665149.pdf>.

²² Trey Miller, Holly Kosiewicz, Melissa Martinez, Kelley Glover, Genna Campaign, and Rodney Andrews, "Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Part-Time Community College Students: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Community College Administrator

developmental and remedial coursework can compound these effects and erode motivation before academic momentum has been established. Additionally, students who lack accurate information about the time and cost required to complete a postsecondary credential may enroll part time due to unrealistic expectations of the time needed to complete a degree.²³

Institutional practices

Academic policies and institutional support services also shape the experiences and outcomes of part-time learners in significant ways. Course schedules are frequently designed around traditional full-time students, with limited evening, weekend, or flexible options for working adults and caregivers.²⁴ Higher education institutions frequently prioritize faculty availability and preferences over student needs when building course schedules, and 74 percent of schools continue to schedule courses on a term-by-term basis, limiting students' ability to plan ahead and leading to misalignments in course supply and demand.²⁵ Registration policies can also make it difficult for part-time students to access the courses they need, particularly when priority registration is tied to credit accumulation or other factors that disadvantage students with interrupted enrollment patterns.²⁶ Inconsistent policies for awarding credit

Perspectives and State-Wide Administrative Data," EdWorkingPaper no. 25-1177, April 2025, <https://doi.org/10.26300/6w7m-2x78>; Wanda M. Osam et al., "An Integrative Literature Review on the Barriers Impacting Adult Learners' Return to College," *Adult Learning* 28, no. 2 (2017): 54–60, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1045159516664361>.

²³ "Even One Semester: Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success," Center for Community College Student Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

²⁴ Trey Miller, Holly Kosiewicz, Melissa Martinez, Kelley Glover, Genna Campaign, and Rodney Andrews, "Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Part-Time Community College Students: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Community College Administrator Perspectives and State-Wide Administrative Data," EdWorkingPaper no. 25-1177, April 2025, <https://doi.org/10.26300/6w7m-2x78>.

²⁵ Wendy Kilgore, "A Comprehensive View of Undergraduate-Class Scheduling: Practice, Policy, Data Use, and Technology," American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 2022, 4, 7, <https://www.aacrao.org/resource/a-comprehensive-view-of-undergraduate-class-practice-policy-data-use-and-technology/>; "Building a Healthy Culture for Academic Scheduling," Complete College America and Ad Astra Information Systems, 2025, <https://completecollegeamerica.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/18135659/BuildingaHealthyCultureforAcademicSchedulingAugust2025.pdf..>

²⁶ Peter R. Bahr et al., "First in Line: Student Registration Priority in Community Colleges," *Educational Policy* 29, no. 2 (2015): 342–74.

for prior learning or transferring credits can further increase costs and time to completion.²⁷ Many part-time students have acquired knowledge and skills through prior work experience, military training, or industry credentials, yet opaque and inconsistent institutional policies prevent them from converting that learning into academic progress. At the same time, many support services—including advising, tutoring, and career counseling—are offered during standard business hours, further reducing accessibility for students who work or have family responsibilities.²⁸

Financial aid and public policy

Policy environments at both the federal and state levels shape access to financial resources, and, in turn, enrollment intensity. While the Federal Pell Grant program does not require full-time enrollment, award amounts are prorated by enrollment status, meaning part-time students receive reduced aid when in fact many costs of attendance such as housing, transportation and dependent care remain constant regardless of how many courses a student takes.²⁹ This prorated aid structure can increase the effective net price of attendance for part-time students. Moreover, students who work to afford their living expenses can risk losing Pell eligibility altogether if they exceed the grant’s income limits.³⁰ Access to federal student loans and Federal Work-Study programs requires at least half-time enrollment, typically defined as six credit hours per term for undergraduates, creating additional barriers for students whose financial, work, or family obligations constrain their ability to take more courses.³¹

²⁷ Wendy Kilgore, “Enhancing Accessibility and Inclusion: The 2024 Landscape of Credit for Prior Learning in U.S. and Canadian Higher Education,” AACRAO, 2024, <https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/state-of-undergraduate-credit-for-prior-learning-report-v4.pdf>.

²⁸ Miller, et al.

²⁹ “2024-2025 Federal Student Aid Handbook, vol. 7, Appendix: Pell Formula Summaries,” US Department of Education, Federal Student Aid, 2024, <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/fsa-handbook/2024-2025/vol7/appx-pell-formula-summaries>; An Ardisone, Sofia Galindo, Andrew F. Wysocki, Eric W. Triplett, and J. Christopher Drew, “The Need for Equitable Scholarship Criteria for Part-Time Students,” *Innovative Higher Education* 46, no. 4 (2021): 461–479, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-021-09549-7>.

³⁰ “Part-Time Students Must Be a Full-Time Priority,” *Complete College America*, August 2022, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/part-time-students.pdf>.

³¹ “Even One Semester: Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success,” Center for Community College Student Engagement, The University of Texas at Austin, 2017.

State level funding and financial aid policies may further compound these constraints. State grant programs often prioritize full-time enrollment through statutory credit-hour requirements, such as three-quarter-time minimum credit thresholds, or special approval processes that part-time students must navigate to receive aid.³² Geographic access to higher education also mediates students' decisions about enrollment intensity, as well as whether to enroll at all. Paying to commute long distances or secure housing to attend an institution can increase the cost of attendance, which can increase a students' work hours, reduce their enrollment intensity, and reduce the likelihood of completion.³³ More broadly, state funding levels influence institutions' capacity to provide flexible course schedules, offer sufficient advising, and support students' academic needs, particularly at community colleges where part-time enrollment is concentrated.³⁴

Public benefits programs can help alleviate financial strain and reduce the tradeoffs students face between working and enrolling. However, the majority of eligible students do not access these resources.

Public benefits programs—including the SNAP, Medicaid, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—can help alleviate financial strain and reduce the tradeoffs students face between working and enrolling. However, the majority of eligible students do not access these resources. Complex eligibility rules (including the restriction that students enrolled more than half-time must meet additional work requirements to qualify for SNAP), burdensome application

³² “Enrollment Requirements in State Financial Aid: 50-State Analysis,” Education Commission of the States, December 14, 2015, <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/EdBeat-enrollment-intensity-request-12142015-2.pdf>.

³³ Riley Acton, Kalena E. Cortes, Lois Miller, and Camila Morales, “Distance to Degrees: How College Proximity Shapes Students’ Enrollment Choices and Attainment Across Race-Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status,” *Economics of Education Review*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2025.102724>.

³⁴ “State Funding’s Influence on College Completion,” *Bipartisan Policy Center*, Accessed March 22, 2026, <https://www.bipartisanpolicy.org/explainer/state-fundings-influence-on-college-completion/>.

processes, limited awareness, and stigma all contribute to low uptake.³⁵ When students don't use these supports, they are left to make enrollment decisions within tighter financial constraints, often resulting in reduced course loads or stopping out altogether.

Strategies for improving outcomes for part-time learners

Recommendations for research and practice

Despite the prevalence and importance of the part-time student population, there remains limited rigorous evidence on effective interventions and policy reforms for improving the academic and labor market outcomes of students who attend part time. Based on our analysis of the evidence base, our understanding of the student population and institutional contexts, and alignment with existing state/institutional policy environments, we recommend six focus areas where targeted investment in rigorous research, policy development, and institutional reform is most likely to translate to improved outcomes for part-time learners. Each focus area synthesizes the existing evidence base, identifies where that evidence falls short, and concludes with a set of priority research questions intended to guide future investment in rigorous research.

³⁵ “Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Estimated Eligibility and Receipt Among Food Insecure College Students,” US Government Accountability Office, June 2024. <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-107074.pdf>; Duke-Benfield, Amy Ellen, “Exploring How Public Benefits Can Help Support Postsecondary Students from Low-Income Backgrounds,” Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED617071.pdf>.

Focus area 1: Comprehensive wraparound support models adapted for students attending less than full time

The strongest causal evidence for improving college persistence and completion outcomes comes from comprehensive, bundled support programs that address the multifaceted barriers that students face through financial aid, academic advising, coaching, and cohort activities.³⁶ The City University of New York's (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) is the most rigorously evaluated of these: a randomized controlled trial found that ASAP nearly doubled three-year graduation rates for participants.³⁷ A six-year follow-up of an Ohio replication of the ASAP model found that participants' annual earnings increased by 11 percent, alongside a 15-percentage-point increase in graduation rates.³⁸ ASAP combines financial support, including tuition waivers, subsidized transportation, and textbook assistance, with required advising, tutoring, career counseling, block scheduling, and a first year seminar, delivered as an integrated package for up to three years.³⁹ The model has since been replicated at 69 institutions across nine states, with replication studies

³⁶ "Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success (CASS) Programs," *Institute for College Access & Success*, 2021, <https://ticas.org/college-completion/comprehensive-approaches-to-student-success-design-principles/>; Sarah Reber, "Supporting Students To and Through College: What Does the Evidence Say?" *Brookings Institute*, December 2024, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/20241211_CESO_Reber_CollegeSupports_1c.pdf;

Alexander Mayer and Kate Tromble, "Comprehensive Approaches to Student Success: Evidence-Based Approach to Increasing College Completion," *MDRC*, April 2022, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/comprehensive-approaches-student-success-evidence-based-approach-increasing>.

³⁷ S. Scrivener, M.J. Weiss, A. Ratledge, T. Rudd, C. Sommo, & H. Fresques, "Doubling graduation rates: Three-year effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for developmental education students," *MDRC*, 2015, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/doubling-graduation-rates>.

³⁸ Colin Hill, Colleen Sommo, and Kayla Warner, "From Degrees to Dollars: Six-Year Findings from the ASAP Ohio Demonstration," *MDRC*, April 2023, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/publications/degrees-dollars>.

³⁹ "EdExplainer: What Is CUNY ASAP, the Model BOOST Will Replicate at 15 N.C. Community Colleges?" *EdNC (EducationNC)*, May 27, 2025, <https://www.ednc.org/edexplainer-what-is-cuny-asap-the-model-boost-will-replicate-at-15-n-c-community-colleges/>.

continuing to build the evidence base on outcomes including earnings and longer-term degree attainment.⁴⁰

These results are compelling, but the program has an important limitation: ASAP typically requires full-time enrollment, and a core mechanism of the model may be its capacity to make full-time attendance financially and logistically possible for students who would otherwise enroll part time.⁴¹ However, full-time enrollment is simply not feasible for many students, and therefore scaling the model requires testing its effectiveness for students who cannot attend full time by addressing the structural constraints faced by part-time students.

The ASAP model has recently been adapted to serve part-time students in several settings. Nashville Flex, launched at Nashville State Community College in 2022, provides eligible part-time students with financial and academic support while pursuing a degree. Early descriptive evidence finds that participants were 12 percent points more likely to persist term-to-term, 23 percentage points more likely to transition to full-time enrollment, and four percentage points more likely to complete a degree or certificate.⁴² These associations are somewhat smaller than those estimated for Nashville GRAD, the full-time counterpart program operating the same model at the same institution, where term-to-term persistence gains were approximately 20 percentage points. The authors of the study attribute this difference to the greater external obligations part-time students carry rather than any deficit in program design. These associations are also smaller in magnitude than the effects observed in ASAP randomized trials, although the study uses fixed-effects models and small cohort sizes, which limits the precision of estimates.

Part-Time Student Accelerating in Learning (SAIL), launched by CUNY,

⁴⁰ "Replication," CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP), The City University of New York, accessed June 2026, <https://www.cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/student-success-initiatives/asap/replication/>.

⁴¹ Sara Weissman S, "Scaling the 'Secret Sauce' for Completion Rates," *Inside Higher Ed*, July 6, 2023, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2023/07/06/efforts-replicate-asap-program-spread>.

⁴² Carolyn J. Heinrich, and Mary M. Smith, "Extending the Promise: Student Experiences with Evolving Supplemental College Promise Programs," *American Educational Research Journal* (2026) <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312261441251>.

MDRC, and Lorain County Community College serves a primarily adult student population with a combination of financial assistance, advising, and specialized course scheduling.⁴³ To adapt the model for part-time enrollment, participating students work with advisors to enroll in at least 18 credits per year and receive incentives including larger textbook vouchers for taking heavier loads, with summer enrollment encouraged to maintain momentum. Early results are encouraging, but a randomized controlled trial is still underway and findings will not be available until 2029. Other part-time adaptations of the ASAP model include pilot programs at CUNY's Bronx Community College and LaGuardia Community College and the Promise Scholars Program at San Mateo County Community College District. Despite these promising early findings, no published causal studies on part-time ASAP replications exist to date. Important questions remain about future research, including which program elements drive the observed associations, whether effects persist over longer follow-up windows, and how results would generalize across institutional contexts with different student populations and resource levels.

⁴³ The Part-Time SAIL Demonstration provides the following integrated package of supports: student supports (enhanced advising or coaching, tutoring, and career services), financial supports (a scholarship that covers the gap between grant aid and tuition and fees, conditional monthly gas/grocery cards, and textbook vouchers), and specialized course enrollment options (block-scheduled classes and student success seminars or orientations). “Evaluation of Part-Time Students: Accelerating Learning (SAIL) Replication of CUNY’s ASAP,” MDRC, <https://www.mdrc.org/work/projects/evaluation-part-time-students-accelerating-learning-sail-replication-cunys-asap>.

Strategy in Practice: Nashville Flex

Nashville State Community College launched Nashville Flex in 2022 to adapt the comprehensive support model for students who cannot attend full time. The program pairs part-time students with a dedicated advisor and offers career support, flexible scheduling, a loaner laptop, internet access, and direct financial support for textbooks, gas, groceries, and emergencies. Rather than pushing students toward full-time enrollment, the model is designed to reduce the hours students must work and free up time to study. In interviews, Flex participants expressed that continuing to work was crucial to their financial stability. They described the program's financial support as helping to reduce the hours they worked, rather than eliminating the need to work altogether, freeing up time for studying. Participants also noted that access to a dedicated advisor and flexible funding support was crucial for managing high levels of academic and financial stress. Early descriptive evidence finds participants were more likely to persist term-to-term, transition to full-time enrollment, and complete a credential. Flex offers an early illustration of how the components that make comprehensive programs effective can be reconfigured to support part-time enrollment.

Several of the components of comprehensive support programs, including flexible scheduling, financial aid access, credit for prior learning, public benefits navigation, and career-aligned advising are examined as standalone focus areas in the sections that follow.

Priority research questions

- What are the causal effects of comprehensive support programs adapted for part-time students on persistence, credential completion, and labor market outcomes?
- Which program elements drive observed effects, and how do bundled components interact, particularly the financial, advising, scheduling, and career-support dimensions?
- How do effects vary across institutional contexts, student populations, and resource levels, and what implementation conditions are necessary for the model to succeed at scale?
- Can comprehensive support models for part-time students be delivered cost-effectively, and what does the evidence suggest

about return on investment relative to more targeted single-component interventions?

Focus area 2: Institutional practices that support flexible course scheduling and delivery

For an adult learner juggling work and caregiving responsibilities, how and when a course is offered matters as much as whether the course exists. Traditional schedules with rigid meeting patterns and daytime offerings often conflict with part-time students' needs to balance learning with work and caregiving responsibilities.⁴⁴ Addressing this requires institutions to shift towards flexible, data-informed, student-centered scheduling, where course offerings are aligned with enrollment patterns, program requirements, and students' needs, rather than anchored on faculty availability or preferences.⁴⁵ Promising reforms include offering more courses via multiple modalities and at non-traditional times (e.g., virtual or hybrid, evenings or weekends) to increase access for students who work or have caregiving responsibilities; structured schedules (e.g., designating regular morning or afternoon blocks for classes or annual scheduling of all classes) that offer predictability and make it easier to plan work shifts and childcare; and accelerated course formats (e.g., eight-week intensive courses instead of the traditional 16-week courses) that can help learners focus intensely on material for fewer courses at a time and minimize the likelihood of disruption due to life circumstances over an extended period.

Part-time students not only need courses offered at times when they are available, they also need to know what to expect when they explore their postsecondary options and register for courses. Ad Astra's 2024 Benchmarking Report found that 26 percent of program requirements are not offered during the terms indicated in pathway guidance. Wide variation

⁴⁴ "Best Practices in Course Scheduling," *Hanover Research*, 2025, <https://f.hubspotusercontent30.net/hubfs/4523134/Hanover%20Research%20-%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Course%20Scheduling.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Faculty availability influences scheduling at 89 percent of institutions and faculty preference at 78 percent. In addition, 74 percent of institutions continue to schedule courses term-by-term, limiting students' ability to plan ahead, "Student-Centric Scheduling Breaks Down Barriers and Keeps Students on the Path to Completion," AACRAO, October 17, 2022, <https://www.aacrao.org/who-we-are/newsroom/article/2022/10/17/student-centric-scheduling-breaks-down-barriers-and-keeps-students-on-the-path-to-completion>.

in over- and under-enrollment across the catalog supports a mismatch between students' needs and course schedules: 23 percent of course sections are over-enrolled while 45 percent are under-enrolled.⁴⁶ Further, part-time students may benefit from annual scheduling rather than selecting courses term-by-term, though most of the data supporting this approach is descriptive or qualitative.⁴⁷

There is some evidence that accelerated or condensed course formats can help students, including part-time students, although most of these studies have been descriptive. A mixed-methods study of Tennessee community colleges found that seven-week courses were associated with higher pass rates (+3.8 percentage points) and lower drop rates (-0.6 percentage points) compared to 15-week courses.⁴⁸ The study found a larger positive association between seven-week courses and outcomes for adult learners (+4.9 percentage points).⁴⁹ Additional research using administrative data from the Virginia Community College System found that accelerated formats improve course completion, persistence, and downstream outcomes, with stronger effects for adult learners and underrepresented students.⁵⁰ However, these accelerated formats were also associated with lower performance in subsequent courses in the same subject area, raising questions about whether observed completion gains reflect durable learning or hide gaps in student preparation.

These findings have begun to attract state-level policy attention and philanthropic investment. Virginia's 2024–2030 statewide strategic plan requires all colleges to offer shortened sessions and asynchronous online

⁴⁶ "Building a Healthy Culture for Academic Scheduling," Complete College America and Ad Astra Information Systems, 2025, <https://completecollegeamerica.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/18135659/BuildingaHealthyCultureforAcademicSchedulingAugust2025.pdf>

⁴⁷ "Beyond the Next Semester," American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and Ad Astra Information Systems, 2025, <https://www.aais.com/hubfs/2025%20Content/aacrao-report-beyond-next-semester-9-2025.pdf>

⁴⁸ "Course Length and Student Success: Quantitative Analysis of 7-Week Courses," The College System of Tennessee, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED673009.pdf>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "Downstream outcomes" refer to enrollment patterns or performance in subsequent courses within the same subject area. XunFei Li and Di Xu, "Efficiency or Burnout? The Effects of Condensed Course Formats on Student Achievement in Community Colleges," *EdWorkingPaper* No. AI25-1273, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.26300/rcrt-tx56>;

delivery for courses included in general education pathways.⁵¹ In Texas, 19 community colleges collaborated under the Talent Strong Texas Pathways strategy to institutionalize eight-week terms, with a published playbook documenting how institutions navigated the accompanying changes to advising, registration, and financial aid processes required to make accelerated formats work at scale.⁵² Additionally, with funding from Ascendium, Achieving the Dream and the Community College Research Center (CCRC) are supporting several colleges in implementing and evaluating shortened academic terms at community colleges across the nation through its “Scaling Shortened Academic Terms” initiative.⁵³

Strategy in Practice: Scaling Eight-Week Terms in Texas

As part of its Talent Strong Texas Pathways strategy, the Texas Success Center has worked with community colleges across the state since 2021 to implement, scale, and institutionalize eight-week terms. The efforts built on the experience of three “leader colleges” that already made the shift and went on to mentor 16 additional institutions through structured cohorts—Odessa College, Kilgore College and Grayson College. Rather than treating accelerated formats as a single scheduling change, the colleges documented how the shift required coordinated changes to advising, registration, and financial aid, and published a shared playbook so other institutions could navigate the same operational hurdles. These scheduling changes are expected to lead to short-term improvements in credit accumulation, term-to-term persistence, and course completion, as well as increased rates of credential completion and transfer to a four-year institution in the longer term.

⁵¹ “Accelerate Opportunity: 2024-2030 Statewide Strategic Plan,” Virginia Community College System, 2025, https://www.vccs.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/VCCS_AccelerateOpportunity_3.2147.pdf.

⁵² Christine Bailie, and Kristina Flores, “Texas Playbook for Scaling Eight-Week Terms for Pathways Transformation: A Guide for College Implementation Teams,” Texas Association of Community Colleges, Texas Success Center, March 2024, <https://www.trellisfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Texas-Playbook-for-Scaling-8-Week-Terms-1.pdf>.

⁵³ “Scaling Shortened Academic Terms,” *Achieving the Dream*, <https://achievingthedream.org/innovation/scaling-shortened-academic-terms/>.

Approaches such as structured scheduling, predictable course sequencing, annual scheduling, and accelerated formats may help students enroll in required courses, plan more effectively, and maintain momentum toward completion. More research is needed to understand effects on persistence, credit accumulation, transfer, and completion; which approaches work best for different student groups; and what institutional contexts support their adoption.⁵⁴

Priority research questions

- What are the impacts of structural reforms to course scheduling and delivery (e.g., accelerated course formats, annual scheduling, block scheduling) on students' postsecondary outcomes (e.g., credit accumulation, time to degree, persistence, and credential completion) and labor market success?
- How does student learning in condensed course formats compare with that of traditional-length semester courses?
- For which student subpopulations are shortened courses most impactful?

Focus area 3: Institutional and system-level reforms that expand degree pathways to account for prior learning

Many part-time learners have acquired relevant experience and skills before enrolling at their current institution. Credit for prior learning (also referred to as prior learning assessment) processes allow students to receive academic credit for validated knowledge and skills acquired outside formal coursework, such as work experience, life experience, military training, industry credentials, or standardized exams like the College Level Examination Program (CLEP). While credit for prior learning is widely available (offered at 82 percent of institutions), it is inconsistently implemented: only 11 percent of students use it, 54 percent of institutions do not accept transfer credits for prior learning, and 85 percent of institutions cap the number of such credits that can apply toward a

⁵⁴ Jessa Valentine, "New Evidence and Next-Generation Questions on Shortened Course Formats," *Ascendium Philanthropy*, <https://www.ascendiumphilanthropy.org/shared-knowledge/news-and-insights/new-evidence-and-next-generation-questions-on-shortened-course-formats>.

credential.⁵⁵ Some of these caps may reflect accreditation requirements rather than institutional discretion, which has implications for the types of reforms that institutions can feasibly implement. Current systems often require students to self-identify as eligible, pay assessment fees, and navigate unclear policies, particularly for transferring credit across institutions.⁵⁶ These barriers can cause transfer students to lose credits, pay more, and take longer to complete their degree.

While credit for prior learning is widely available, it is inconsistently implemented: only 11 percent of students use it, 54 percent of institutions do not accept transfer credits for prior learning, and 85 percent of institutions cap the number of such credits that can apply toward a credential.

The most credible causal evidence on the impact of credit for prior learning comes from a regression discontinuity study of standardized exam-based credit (specifically CLEP), which found that students who pass a CLEP exam are more likely to complete a degree, with stronger effects for adult learners, veterans, Black and Hispanic students, and those pursuing associate degrees.⁵⁷ A 2025 study by College Board on the

⁵⁵ “In the Clear: Adult Learner Insights on Prior Learning Assessment,” *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning*, October 2025, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED678655.pdf>; “The State of Undergraduate Credit for Prior Learning: A National Survey of Postsecondary Institutions,” AACRAO, 2023, <https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/state-of-undergraduate-credit-for-prior-learning-report-v4.pdf>; “Fueling the Race to Postsecondary Success: A 48-Institution Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Student Outcomes (PLA Boost),” *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*, October 2020, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED609771>.

⁵⁶ “State of Undergraduate Credit for Prior Learning: 2024 Report,” AACRAO, <https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/state-of-undergraduate-credit-for-prior-learning-report-v4.pdf>; Rebecca Klein-Collins, and Peter Bransberger, “Equity and Outcomes: Prior Learning Assessment Equity Report,” *CAEL and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*, October 2021, <https://www.cael.org/hubfs/PLA%20Equity%20Report%20CAEL%20WICHE%20October%202021.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Angela Boatman, Michael Hurwitz, Jason Lee, and Jonathan Smith, “The Impact of Prior Learning Assessment on College Completion,” *Journal of Human Resources* 55, no. 4 (2020): 1161–98, <https://jhr.uwpress.org/content/55/4/1161>.

placement validity of CLEP suggests that CLEP credit does not come at the expense of academic preparation. CLEP credit holders perform as well as or better than peers who completed the equivalent introductory course in subsequent coursework across most subject areas, though the study focuses primarily on students who enroll immediately at four-year institutions after high school.⁵⁸ Back-of-the-envelope calculations suggest that a policy that increased the number of first-time CLEP takers by 1,000 would create 12 to 38 additional associate degrees completed within 150 percent of normal time, at a cost of \$97 per exam or roughly \$255 to \$808 per additional associate degree earned, before accounting for savings from courses students can skip.⁵⁹ Most other credit for prior learning models are supported primarily by evidence from descriptive or matching studies. A multi-institution study of PLA Boost by CAEL/WICHE using propensity score matching suggests that students who have received credit for prior learning accumulate more credits and complete credentials at higher rates than non-participants, with larger estimated effects for community college students, Pell recipients, and some students of color.⁶⁰

Additional descriptive studies reinforce these findings at the state level and highlight cost savings to students and states. A descriptive analysis of the Colorado Community College System's program found that earning credit for prior learning was associated with a 5.9 percentage point increase in the probability of completing an associate degree and a 6.7 percentage point increase in the probability of earning any credential.⁶¹ Other studies in California have estimated that implementing credit for prior learning can result in approximately \$6,800 in apportionment

⁵⁸ Jing Feng and Jeff Wyatt, "The Validity of CLEP Scores for Course Placement Decisions," College Board Research, May 2025, https://research.collegeboard.org/media/pdf/CLEP_ResearchBrief_2025_Final.pdf

⁵⁹ "Exam Topics," CLEP, College Board, Accessed June 5, 2026, <https://clep.collegeboard.org/clep-exams>. See Appendix A for a detailed description of the assumptions and calculations underlying this estimate.

⁶⁰ Rebecca Klein-Collins, et al., "The PLA Boost: Results from a 72-Institution Targeted Study of Prior Learning Assessment and Adult Learner Outcomes," *Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education*, October 2020, <https://www.cael.org/hubfs/PLA%20Boost%20Report%20CAEL%20WICHE%20-%20October%202020.pdf>.

⁶¹ Heather A. McKay, and Daniel Douglas, "Credit for Prior Learning in the Community College: A Case from Colorado," In *Recognition of Prior Learning in the 21st Century*, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2020, <https://www.wiche.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Rutgers-brief-102620.pdf>.

savings per student for the state, and average savings of \$14,600–\$28,900 for working adults, depending on the number of credits awarded.⁶²

Strategy in Practice: Ithaka S+R's Holistic Credit Mobility Cohort

In February 2024, Ithaka S+R launched its first Holistic Credit Mobility Acceleration Cohort with 12 systems and institutions across the nation. The cohort builds on the Holistic Credit Mobility framework, introduced in 2022, for making sense of contemporary student mobility and devising solutions that center the success of mobile students with multiple forms and sources of validated learning.* Over the course of a year, members engaged in self-reflective activities, Ithaka S+R supported technical assistance, and took part in learning, measurement, and implementation activities designed to help them develop a unified language around credit mobility, identify best practices, policies, and technologies, and collaborate to move the needle for learners. By the end of the cohort, members succeeded in advancing the principles of holistic credit mobility in a variety of ways. This included establishing systemwide credit for prior learning policies, procedures, and guidelines, developing outcomes-based learning frameworks to support transfer of associates degrees, and even launching new technology and data infrastructure to aid transparent and efficient credit mobility practices.

*Sarah Pingel, Chau-Fang Lin, and Martin Kurzweil, "Holistic Credit Mobility: Centering Learning in Credential Completion," *Ithaka S+R*, Last Modified 16 November 2022, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.317882>.

Credit for prior learning remains underutilized due to well-documented implementation barriers, including faculty resistance, inconsistent policies, limited staffing, technology constraints, and low student awareness.⁶³ The Department of Education's draft accreditation regulations propose new expectations for transfer credit policies, including that institutions make their policies more transparent, provide timely

⁶² "Expected Economic Benefits of Credit for Prior Learning in California," Beacon Economics, 2024, <https://map.rccd.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Expected-Economic-Benefits-of-CPL-in-California.pdf>.

⁶³ "State of Undergraduate Credit for Prior Learning: 2024 Report," American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, <https://www.aacrao.org/docs/default-source/research-docs/state-of-undergraduate-credit-for-prior-learning-report-v4.pdf>.

notice of transfer-credit evaluations, operate under a presumption of transferability, and have an appeals process.⁶⁴ These new guidelines reinforce the need to understand the causal effects of non-exam credit for prior learning modalities and statewide or systemwide reforms; the extent to which these impacts are shaped by institutional contexts (e.g., robust advising infrastructure, clear program pathways, alignment of data systems and tools to support how institutions manage and share credit information, applicability of credit to program requirements); and the cost-effectiveness of different models.

Priority research questions

- How can institutions most effectively redesign degree requirements so that credit for prior learning applies to students' general education and major requirements, supports smooth credit transfer, and helps students stay on track to completion?
- What are the impacts of different credit for prior learning modalities (e.g., portfolio-based, work-based, and industry certification) on students' postsecondary outcomes (e.g., credit accumulation, persistence, and credential completion) and labor market success?
- To what extent are observed effects driven by credit acceleration versus associated institutional practices (advising, degree mapping, program structure) and policies?
- How do impacts vary by student characteristics (race, income, part-time status), institutional practices (proactive advising, degree mapping, credit applicability to program requirements, transferability of credits), and other factors?
- What are the impacts of state or system-level credit for prior learning policies or agreements (e.g., transfer guarantees, fee reductions, standardization, automated systems) on students' postsecondary and labor market outcomes?
- What are the cost-effectiveness implications of different credit for prior learning models?

⁶⁴ "Accreditation Negotiated Rulemaking Memo," Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, May 2026, <https://www.aplu.org/wp-content/uploads/Accreditation-Memo-2026.pdf>.

Focus area 4: Career-focused supports and employer-connected pathways for part-time students

Many part-time learners are balancing work, caregiving, and other responsibilities that shape both when they can engage with college and what they need from it. For these students, postsecondary education is often closely tied to employment goals: advancing in a current job, entering a new field, or securing more stable wages and schedules. Yet the institutional structures meant to support students' progress—including advising, career services, and program planning—are often designed around traditional schedules and full-time enrollment patterns.⁶⁵ This can make it harder for part-time students to access guidance that connects their coursework to clear labor market opportunities.

In practice, career-aligned advising helps students identify career goals and map academic pathways that are clearly connected to local employment opportunities, skill development, and career advancement.

Career-aligned advising tailored for working students and employer-supported work experiences may be especially promising in addressing these gaps. In practice, career-aligned advising helps students identify career goals and map academic pathways that are clearly connected to local employment opportunities, skill development, and career advancement. Employer-supported work experiences are initiatives that are developed in partnership with employers, typically with the employer providing some funding to offset student and/or institutional costs and working with students to align their education and work schedules. These approaches may be particularly valuable for part-time learners because they can make the relevance of postsecondary education more immediate, reduce uncertainty about next steps, and better align academic progress with work and family constraints.

⁶⁵ “Building on Completion Gains,” *Complete College America*, December 2022, <https://search.issuelab.org/resources/41493/41493.pdf>.

Public-sector variants of employer-connected models are also emerging. New York City's new Mayor's Undergraduate Scholarship Program provides municipal employees with the opportunity to pursue an associate or bachelor's degrees at participating institutions while remaining employed by the city.⁶⁶ All scholarships are awarded and funded directly by participating institutions. The program is not targeted specifically to part-time students, but some participating institutions allow less than full-time enrollment and participants are required to attend classes outside of work hours. It is too early to assess the scholarship's reach or outcomes, but it illustrates a potential model where public employers can play a more active role in structuring pathways for working adult learners, particularly when private employer capacity or willingness to invest is limited.

Comprehensive support programs that include career-aligned advising, predictable scheduling, and employer partnerships have the potential to particularly benefit part-time and working learners. Though the evidence base on these topics is thin, some descriptive and correlational evidence points to the potential value of programs that more explicitly connect education to work. Houston Community College's TEACH Early Childhood Texas program partners with childcare centers to support employees in earning credentials in early childhood education.⁶⁷ Columbus State Community College has implemented a model for respiratory care students who are employed while enrolled, combining small cohorts with a fixed and predictable schedule.⁶⁸ Together, these examples suggest that models linking advising, scheduling, employer partnership, and career relevance may hold promise for part-time students. Still, the field lacks strong causal evidence on whether, for whom, and under what conditions these approaches improve postsecondary and labor market outcomes.

⁶⁶ "Mayor's Undergraduate Scholarship Program," Department of Citywide Administrative Services, City of New York, accessed June 2026, <https://home4.nyc.gov/site/dcas/agencies/mayors-undergraduate-scholarship.page>.

⁶⁷ Lena Novak, Claudia Escobar, Noor Amanullah, Makoto Toyoda, and Rebekah O'Donoghue, "Defining the Part-Time Student and Identifying Promising Practices," MDRC, 2025, https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Promising_Practices_for_PT_Students.pdf.

⁶⁸ "Respiratory Care Part-Time Cohort," Columbus State Community College, <https://www.csc.edu/academics/departments/respiratory-care/part-time-cohort.shtml>.

Strategy in Practice: Ivy Tech Community College’s Achieve Your Degree Program

Launched in 2015, the program partners with more than 250 employers to help employees pursue certificates and degrees while working, with employers covering tuition through available tax benefits. An evaluation conducted by RAND found that participation in Achieve Your Degree was associated with higher rates of postsecondary credential completion—especially short-term certificates, but also that the program operates with limited staffing and resources, underscoring the importance of sustained institutional and employer investment.*

*Megan Andrew, Kristin J. Leuschner, Tiffany Berglund, Lucas Greer, and Kami Ehrich, “Building Employer–Community College Partnerships to Increase Working Adult Learner Success,” *RAND Corporation*, 2026, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RBA3681-1.html.

There is a need for research on strategies that more directly connect part-time students’ educational experiences to career advancement and labor market success. Future studies could examine models in which institutions and employers jointly shape advising, scheduling, work-based learning, or benefit structures so that students can make steady academic progress while working. Research could also test whether career-aligned advising helps part-time students select programs, persist through completion, and translate credentials into improved employment and earnings outcomes. Because many part-time learners are already in the workforce, interventions that more clearly connect coursework to career advancement may be especially important.

Priority research questions

- How do employer-connected programs affect postsecondary progress, credential attainment, employment, and earnings outcomes for part-time students?
- What features of employer partnerships—such as tuition support, predictable scheduling, cohort models, paid work-based learning, or advancement opportunities—are most associated with positive outcomes?

- What are the impacts of career-aligned advising on program selection, persistence, completion, and labor market outcomes for part-time students?
- How do structured program maps and clearly sequenced career pathways affect momentum, completion, and employment outcomes for part-time students?
- How do career-focused supports interact with broader comprehensive support models, and which combinations appear most effective for different groups of part-time learners?

Focus area 5: Systems that help students more easily access existing public benefits programs, including federal, state, and local programs

Part-time students have competing financial responsibilities and experience higher rates of basic needs insecurity than their full-time peers, even when working.⁶⁹ Public benefits programs such as SNAP, WIC, Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can help students persist by addressing major fixed costs associated with attendance, including food, housing, childcare, and healthcare. Yet, many eligible students do not enroll in benefits programs because they are unsure of their eligibility, find application processes too onerous, or face stigma around receiving public assistance.⁷⁰ Eligibility rules add further complexity: students enrolled more than half time only qualify for SNAP if they meet certain exemption requirements, such as working 20 hours per week or parenting a child under age six, while those enrolled less than half time are generally not subject to these same restrictions.⁷¹ Students may have limited awareness and understanding of these eligibility-related rules, limiting uptake. Parenting students, who are more likely to enroll

⁶⁹ “The Hope Center 2023–2024 Student Basic Needs Survey Report,” *The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs*, Temple University, February 26, 2025, <https://hope.temple.edu/sites/hope/files/media/document/Hope%20Student%20Basic%20Needs%20Survey%20Report%20202324.pdf>.

⁷⁰ “Building Student Awareness About SNAP Benefits,” *The Feed*, Georgetown University, August 9, 2024, <https://feed.georgetown.edu/access-affordability/building-student-awareness-about-snap-benefits/>.

⁷¹ “Students,” US Department of Agriculture, Last revised: November 6, 2025, <https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/students>.

part time, face higher living costs which may increase their risk of housing insecurity. However, housing solutions usually demand an overlay of federal, state, and local remedies, which makes them complex to administer and, in many cases, difficult to access.⁷²

Building strategic partnerships between state agencies, community organizations, and institutions can help construct easily navigated pathways for students seeking assistance.

For part-time students, who are more likely to be working, parenting, and from low-income families, leveraging community resources and increasing access to public benefits are important ways to support enrollment and persistence. Building strategic partnerships between state agencies, community organizations, and institutions can help construct easily navigated pathways for students seeking assistance. For instance, states and institutions can work together to leverage shared data for targeted outreach, provide benefits application assistance, and reduce administrative barriers to maximize access to benefits.⁷³ Cross-sector collaboration will likely become even more important as changes from the One Big Beautiful Bill Act to SNAP and Medicaid come into effect, as demand for basic need support is likely to expand while availability of resources constricts.⁷⁴

⁷² Nick Graetz and Edward Conroy, “Ousted from Opportunity: Eviction’s Adverse Impact on Parenting College Students,” *New America*, June 26, 2025, <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/what-happens-student-parents-threatened-with-eviction/>.

⁷³ May Helena Plumb, “Connecting College Students With Public Benefits Programs,” *Trellis Strategies*, January 2024, https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Toolkit_PublicBenefitsPrograms.pdf.

⁷⁴ The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBA), enacted in July 2025, will cut projected federal Medicaid and SNAP funding significantly over the next several years. It introduces new eligibility rules, including updated work requirements for adult enrollees and more frequent eligibility redeterminations. This will likely result in millions of people being removed from enrollment and participation in these programs. For more information about the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and its impact, see: Mia Ives-Rublee and Kim Musheno, “The Truth About the One Big Beautiful Bill Act’s Cuts to Medicaid and Medicare,” *Center for American Progress*, July 3, 2025, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-truth-about-the-one-big-beautiful-bill-acts-cuts-to-medicaid-and-medicare/>; Amelia Coffey and Heather Hahn, “Medicaid Cuts in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act Leave 3 in 10 Young Adults Vulnerable to Losing Health Care Access,” *Urban Institute*, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/medicaid-cuts-one-big->

Basic needs insecurity is a well-documented barrier to postsecondary success, but there is limited causal evidence linking increased benefit utilization to postsecondary and labor market outcomes. Some of the strongest available evidence for SNAP comes from a recent quasi-experimental study using administrative, FAFSA, and SNAP data for community college students in California. Using propensity score methods, the study found that among a subset of students with prior SNAP participation, continuing to receive SNAP benefits increased the probability of earning 30 or more credits in the first year by 1.4 percentage points and persistence to year two by 2.6 percentage points.⁷⁵

Additional evidence from the Benefits Access for College Completion (BACC) Evaluation, which examined efforts at five institutions to increase public benefits access through screening and application support, found that students receiving benefits were more likely to enroll for additional terms compared to matched peers. However, these findings are based on non-experimental methods and are limited to one participating institution.⁷⁶ Importantly, a randomized evaluation of Single Stop, a non-profit that coordinates access to public benefits and financial counseling, did not detect impacts on student outcomes, largely because few eligible students engaged with the program.⁷⁷ Evidence on how best to increase benefits enrollment, particularly for students likely to attend part time, remains limited.

[beautiful-bill-act-leave-3-10-young-adults-vulnerable-losing](https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/snap-cuts-one-big-beautiful-bill-act-leave-almost-3-million-young-adults-vulnerable); Amelia Coffey and Heather Hahn, “SNAP Cuts in One Big Beautiful Bill Act Leave Almost 3 Million Young Adults Vulnerable to Losing Nutrition Assistance,” *Urban Institute*, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/snap-cuts-one-big-beautiful-bill-act-leave-almost-3-million-young-adults-vulnerable>.

⁷⁵ Igor Chirikov and Jesse Rothstein, “The Impact of Nutrition Assistance on College Student Success,” *CSHE Higher Education Working Paper Series* 26, 2 (March 2026), <https://escholarship.org/content/qt8mk575r7/qt8mk575r7.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Derek Price, Meg Long, Sarah Singer Quast, Jennifer McMaken, and Georgia Kioukis, “Public Benefits and Community Colleges: Lessons from the Benefits Access for College Completion Evaluation,” *Equal Measure*, November 19, 2014, <https://www.equalmeasure.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/BACC-Final-Report-FINAL-111914.pdf>.

⁷⁷ Lindsay Daughtery, Jenna W. Kramer, Louis T. Mariano, Clare Cady, Heather Gomez-Bendaña, Tiffany Berglund, Samantha Ryan, Michelle Bongard, Joshua Eagan, and Christopher Joseph Doss, “Connecting Students to Basic Needs Support: An Evaluation of Single Stop Across Ten Colleges,” *RAND Corporation*, June 2, 2025, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3771-1.html.

Beyond the causal evidence, there is descriptive work that highlights potential impact and best practices for increasing access to public benefits. A recent longitudinal study from ChildTrends and RAND found that people from low-income backgrounds who accessed public benefits were more likely to enroll in postsecondary education beyond high school.⁷⁸

Several tools are available to help states and institutions improve access and expand eligibility for postsecondary students, including part-time students. For example:

- The Hope Center reviewed state policies related to federal public benefit programs to develop recommendations for re-defining eligibility requirements for programs like SNAP, TANF, and the Childcare and Development Fund (CCDF) to maximize public benefits access for students.⁷⁹
- Trellis Strategies also produced a toolkit for institutions related to public benefits. In it, they recommend creating a shared institutional narrative that destigmatizes public benefit receipt and encourages help-seeking behavior. The toolkit also recommends updating institutional structures to minimize obstacles to accessing public benefits, such as standardizing work-study hours to align with benefit work requirements.⁸⁰
- The Benefits Access for College Completion (BACC) Initiative was formed to develop sustainable funding and operational approaches to integrate support services into community colleges and improve access to public benefits for eligible low-income students. The initiative identified a number of suggested practices, such as building relationships with local and state agencies, integrating public benefits support into institutional infrastructure, and

⁷⁸ Renee Ryberg and Dana Thomson with Holly Keaton and Jessica Conway, “Public Benefits and Financial Aid Support Education Beyond High School and Long-Term Economic Well-Being for Low-Income Young Adults,” *ChildTrends and RAND*, April 2026, https://media.childtrends.org/media/EconomicSupportProgramsEducationalPathwaysBrief_ChildTrends_April2026.pdf.

⁷⁹ Leslie Rios, Carrie R. Welton, and Mark Huelsman, “The State of State Choices: A National Landscape Analysis of Postsecondary Eligibility Restrictions and Opportunities in SNAP, CCDF, and TANF,” *The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs*, May 6, 2024, <https://hope.temple.edu/public-benefits-eligibility-students>.

⁸⁰ May Helena Plumb, “Connecting College Students With Public Benefits Programs,” *Trellis Strategies*, January 2024, https://www.trellisstrategies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Toolkit_PublicBenefitsPrograms.pdf.

leveraging data to support outreach based on case studies and literature/policy review.⁸¹

Strategy in Practice: Comprehensive Communication Framework

To maximize public benefits enrollment, states and institutions can also work together to create comprehensive communications and leverage shared data. For example, Washington piloted a statewide benefits promotion with 15 public institutions and the Department of Social and Health Services. Every quarter, participating institutions received a list of students who were likely eligible for public benefits but not receiving them. The institutions used that information to conduct targeted outreach through texts, email, and learning management system notifications and point students to relevant applications and campus support. In addition to using multiple communication channels, institutions utilized partnerships with faculty across campus. Institutions also participated in a collaborative learning group focused on sharing and leveraging the most effective practices for supporting students.* Models like the pilot in Washington can help raise awareness about eligibility, support students in completing complex applications, and reduce stigma by building a culture of benefit uptake.

*Taylor Burtch, Da'Shon Carr, Sara Goldrick-Rab, and Ami Magisos, "Key Lessons From Washington State's Benefits Promotion Pilot," *Washington Student Achievement Council*, 2025, https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Key.Lessons.from_.WA_.Benefits.Promotion.Pilot_.pdf.

Despite promising descriptive evidence linking benefits receipt to improved student outcomes, there is no causal evidence on which outreach, screening, and enrollment assistance models most effectively increase uptake among college students, particularly part-time learners. Given the limited take-up of these federal benefits programs, further research is needed to identify interventions that effectively connect eligible students to existing resources and examine the impact of increased utilization of public resources on student outcomes, particularly for those likely to study part time.

⁸¹ Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield and Katherine Saunders, "Benefits Access for College Completion: Lessons Learned From a Community College Initiative to Help Low-Income Students," *Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Benefits-Access-for-College-Completion-Lessons-Learned.pdf>.

Priority research questions

- What strategies or delivery models most effectively increase take-up of public benefit programs (e.g., enrollment assistance, opt-in screening, embedded advising, data-driven targeting, behavioral nudges, partnerships with community organizations) by college students?
- What is the causal impact of increased benefit utilization on postsecondary outcomes and labor market outcomes, including credit accumulation, persistence, and completion, and work intensity?
 - How do impacts vary by student characteristics (race, income, part-time status, parenting status) and institutional context (two-year, four-year)?
- What are the impacts of state or system-level policies and approaches (e.g., data sharing, eligibility simplification, integration benefits with financial aid systems) on benefit utilization and student outcomes?

Focus area 6: Expanded access to state financial aid

Access to need-based grant aid has a positive effect on persistence, degree attainment, and enrollment intensity, yet part-time students are far less likely to receive it.⁸² In 2019-20, 45 percent of exclusively part-time students did not receive any form of financial aid, compared to 22 percent of full-time students.⁸³ Part-time students are often excluded from state financial aid programs entirely, and when they are included, award structures typically do not account for the fixed costs of attendance that students face regardless of how many credits they carry. This is especially

⁸² Susan Dynarski, Lindsay C. Page, and Judith Scott-Clayton, “College Costs, Financial Aid, and Student Decisions,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, July 2022, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30275/w30275.pdf; Tuan D. Nguyen, Jenna W. Kramer, and Brent J. Evans, “The Effects of Grant Aid on Student Persistence and Degree Attainment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence,” CEPA Working Paper 18, 4, *Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis*, March 2018, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592359.pdf>.

⁸³ Authors’ calculations using the 2012/2017 Beginning Postsecondary Students Survey

concerning given that part-time students are disproportionately likely to be low-income and to carry greater financial obligations.

When aid is inadequate or unavailable, students work more hours to finance their education. This reduces academic momentum, extends time to degree, and increases total costs. To increase the reach and effectiveness of state financial aid for students likely to enroll part time, states can pursue reforms such as extending eligibility to part-time students in statute and practice, prorating aid on the basis of need rather than credits enrolled, removing priority timelines that disadvantage nontraditional applicants, simplifying aid application processes, and targeting aid linked to high-demand credentials and workforce outcomes.

The financial aid landscape is also evolving at the federal level. The new Pell grant for students completing workforce-aligned, short-term non-degree credentials raises important questions about how institutional and state aid structures will adapt for students who move between degree and non-degree pathways. Understanding how students, institutions, and states respond to these changes and which student populations benefit will be essential to ensuring that students and taxpayers are better off.

There is causal evidence that grant aid improves student outcomes. A meta-analysis of financial aid research found that reducing the net price of college, including through additional grant aid, increases enrollment independent of student characteristics.⁸⁴ A second meta-analysis found that grant aid increases the likelihood of persistence and degree completion by two to three percentage points, and that an additional \$1,000 in grant aid improved year-to-year persistence by 1.2 percentage points.⁸⁵ A regression discontinuity study found that students who are marginally eligible for Pell grants were more likely to enroll full time and reduce their work hours than students who were marginally ineligible.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Susan Dynarski, Lindsay C. Page, and Judith Scott-Clayton, “College Costs, Financial Aid, and Student Decisions,” *National Bureau of Economic Research*, July 2022, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30275/w30275.pdf.

⁸⁵ Tuan D. Nguyen, Jenna W. Kramer, and Brent J. Evans, “The Effects of Grant Aid on Student Persistence and Degree Attainment: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence,” CEPA Working Paper 18, 4, *Stanford Center for Education Policy Analysis*, March 2018, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED592359.pdf>.

⁸⁶ Rina Seung Eun Park and Judith Scott-Clayton, “The Impact of Pell Grant Eligibility on Community College Students’ Financial Aid Packages, Labor Supply, and Academic Outcomes,” *Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment*, March 2017, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED574818.pdf>.

Causal evidence from Michigan Reconnect, a statewide last-dollar grant for adults at community colleges, shows a 38 percent increase in adult enrollment driven almost entirely by part-time students.⁸⁷ A differences-in-differences study of adult-focused aid programs across 10 states found positive enrollment effects at two-year institutions, particularly for programs with simple application processes, though results were mixed overall.⁸⁸

Strategy in Practice: Virginia's G3 (Get Skilled, Get a Job, Get Ahead) Program

Virginia's G3 program is among the few state financial aid models explicitly designed to serve part-time students at community colleges. The program targets aid to students enrolled in high-demand fields such as health care, information technology, manufacturing, public safety, and early childhood education, and extends eligibility to students enrolled less than full time only at community colleges, where part-time students are more likely to enroll. The program spent \$16.7 million on 8,573 recipients in 2023 (about \$1,947 per student, on average).^{*} There is causal evidence that the G3 program significantly increases grant aid and reduces student borrowing. The same study found suggestive evidence with limited statistical power that G3 increases certificate completion in the targeted fields, while finding no evidence of greater completion of degrees beyond a certificate.^{**} Whether G3's gains in certificate completion translate into improved employment and earnings over time is an open question.

^{*} "54th Annual Survey Report on State-Sponsored Student Financial Aid: 2022–2023," National Association of State Student Grant and Aid Programs (NASSGAP), 2023.

^{**} Sade Bonilla, and Daniel Sparks. (2025). "Get a Skill, Get a Job, Get Ahead? Evaluating the Effects of Virginia's Workforce-Targeted Free College Program," EdWorkingPaper: 25 -1167, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.26300/q32w-tw61>.

⁸⁷ Sky Duke and Taylor Odle. "Does Free College 'Work' for Adults? Enrollment Impacts of Michigan Reconnect," *Educational Researcher* (November 25, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X251393204>.

⁸⁸ Adela Soliz, and Coral Flanagan, "Do State Financial Aid Policies Increase College Enrollment and Completion for Adult Learners?" *The Journal of Higher Education* (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2497187>.

Evidence on which specific aid models most effectively serve part-time students is thin, but institutions and states looking to support part-time students can learn from new models and recommendations. The Education Commission of the States' Redesigning State Financial Aid framework recommends that aid programs be broadly inclusive of all educational pathways, including competency-based programs, prior learning assessments, and online course delivery.⁸⁹ Several states are already reassessing aid structures to expand access for part-time learners. New York expanded Part-Time TAP in fall 2022 to students enrolling in between six to 11 credits, and further extended eligibility to students taking as few as three credits beginning in the 2025–26 academic year along with reducing some other restrictions, making roughly 75,000 additional students newly eligible.⁹⁰ Massachusetts maintains a dedicated Part-Time Grant Program for students enrolled in between six and 11 credits, available for certificate, associate, and bachelor's degree programs.⁹¹ Other states are working to re-enroll adult learners, who are likely to enroll part time, through targeted aid programs. Similar to the Michigan Reconnect program mentioned previously, Tennessee has a robust reconnect initiative that provides adult learners, including those who are enrolled part time, with grant aid and support from dedicated navigators.⁹² New Mexico's Opportunity Scholarship has a returning learner track that allows for part-time enrollment and is

⁸⁹ Sarah Pingel, Brian A. Sponsler, and Neal Holly, "Redesigning State Financial Aid: Principles to Guide State Aid Policymaking," Education Commission of the States, August 2018, <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Redesigning-State-Financial-Aid.pdf>.

⁹⁰ "Part-Time Tuition Assistance Program (TAP)," Higher Education Services Corporation, New York State, <https://hesc.ny.gov/find-aid/nys-grants-scholarships/part-time-tuition-assistance-program-tap>.

⁹¹ "Part-Time Grant Program," Office of Student Financial Assistance, Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, <https://www.mass.edu/osfa/programs/parttime.asp>.

⁹² Tennessee Reconnect is a last-dollar grant covering tuition and mandatory fees for adults (age 23 or older, or independent of the FAFSA) enrolled at least part time (a minimum of six credit hours) at an eligible community or technical college. Through Navigate Reconnect, applicants are paired with regionally based Navigators who provide individualized support with enrollment, financial aid, and connection to campus and community resources from intake through completion. "Tennessee Reconnect," Tennessee Higher Education Commission, <https://www.tn.gov/nexttennessee/tennessee-reconnect.html>; Tennessee Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Research and Education Accountability, "Tennessee Reconnect Grant," 2022, <https://comptroller.tn.gov/content/dam/cot/orea/advanced-search/2022/ReconnectFullReport.pdf>.

automatically applied for eligible students.⁹³ These state-level reforms create natural opportunities for rigorous evaluation of the causal effects of expanding part-time eligibility, simplifying applications, and restructuring award calculations on postsecondary persistence, completion, and labor market outcomes.

Priority research questions

- What are the impacts of state-level aid reforms that expand part-time eligibility (e.g., lowering credit thresholds, removing full-time requirements) on postsecondary and labor market outcomes?
- How do impacts vary by design of grant aid model (last-dollar vs fixed award, targeted vs. universal)?
- How do impacts of grant aid programs on student outcomes vary by student enrollment intensity?
- How are states implementing the new workforce Pell program, and how does take up vary by students' enrollment intensity? To what extent does workforce Pell shape students' enrollment decisions and longer-term outcomes?
- What alternative financing models show promise (e.g., outcomes-based loans, grants for municipal employees, etc.)?

⁹³ "NM Opportunity Scholarship," New Mexico State University Financial Aid and Scholarship Services, <https://fa.nmsu.edu/scholarships/opportunity.html>.

Conclusion

Part-time students are not a niche population in higher education; they represent about one-quarter of all undergraduate students at four-year institutions and nearly two-thirds at two-year institutions. However, they continue to face substantially lower persistence and completion rates than their full-time peers. For too long, the prevailing approach to addressing these outcomes gaps was to encourage part-time students to increase their credit loads or to enroll full time, rather than designing solutions that meet them where they are. As this report demonstrates, these gaps are driven primarily by structural barriers at the institutional and state levels.

Across the focus areas examined in this report, the most promising strategies to overcome these barriers are those that increase flexibility, reduce financial and administrative burdens, strengthen connections between education and employment, and recognize the learning students bring with them from work and life experience. However, there remains limited rigorous evidence linking these interventions to improved academic and labor market outcomes of students who attend part-time. Key research questions for further exploration include which combinations of financial, academic, and career supports that most effectively improve persistence and completion; how reforms to course scheduling, credit mobility, public benefits access, and financial aid shape student outcomes; and which approaches produce lasting gains in employment and earnings.

Part-time students should not be an afterthought, but instead should be given close attention as a population whose success is essential to the future of postsecondary education and workforce development.

This work is particularly urgent given ongoing policy changes, including the implementation of Workforce Pell, evolving federal student loan policies that could alter how part-time students finance their education, and changes to SNAP and Medicaid that may affect students' access to basic-

needs supports. As policymakers, researchers, and institutions respond to these ongoing changes, part-time students should not be an afterthought but instead should be given close attention as a population whose success is essential to the future of postsecondary education and workforce development.

Appendix A

Table A.1: Prevalence of interacted archetypes by enrollment intensity

Archetype	All students	Exclusively full time	Exclusively part time	Mixed full time and part time
Full-time worker and Attend public 2-year	18%	10%	36%	17%
Full-time worker and Adult learner	19%	12%	38%	16%
Full-time worker and Enrolled in online program	12%	9%	19%	11%
Full-time worker and Parent	10%	7%	20%	8%
Attend public 2-year and Adult learner	16%	8%	37%	15%
Attend public 2-year and Enrolled in online program	9%	5%	15%	10%
Attend public 2-year and Parent	9%	4%	19%	8%
Adult learner and Enrolled in online program	13%	10%	21%	11%
Adult learner and Parent	16%	12%	28%	14%
Enrolled in online program and Parent	8%	7%	12%	7%

Table A.2: Full-time worker share by enrollment intensity and student's state of legal residence

State of legal residence	All students	Exclusively full time	Exclusively part time	Mixed full time and part time	Some part time
Alabama	45.9	41.9	59.9	38.1	49.5
Alaska	60.5	46.7	79.8	54.0	70.2
Arizona	48.3	40.4	61.6	44.7	54.7
Arkansas	43.8	38.5	58.4	44.8	51.4
California	32.6	25.3	47.7	28.7	38.2
Colorado	47.5	39.9	66.3	41.5	54.2
Connecticut	37.1	30.8	49.7	34.6	43.5
Delaware	43.1	36.6	54.0	41.8	48.0
District of Columbia	26.6	18.0	55.6	35.6	44.0
Florida	44.5	35.9	60.7	39.4	49.7
Georgia	42.1	38.2	54.3	38.4	45.9
Hawaii	33.0	22.6	53.3	27.7	43.3
Idaho	50.7	55.3	48.9	39.4	44.1
Illinois	43.3	36.7	62.2	37.9	50.2
Indiana	51.4	46.1	69.6	41.4	56.8
Iowa	41.7	35.4	71.1	34.1	49.9
Kansas	43.8	39.7	66.0	36.4	49.0
Kentucky	41.8	36.8	59.5	43.4	49.9
Louisiana	36.3	32.1	54.3	33.2	43.3
Maine	42.3	34.3	60.5	40.2	51.6
Maryland	40.3	34.3	53.6	37.1	46.3
Massachusetts	36.5	28.3	59.9	37.4	49.5
Michigan	43.8	36.6	54.5	47.4	51.0
Minnesota	44.9	35.7	61.6	43.8	53.7
Mississippi	36.5	36.0	54.2	28.7	37.3
Missouri	45.7	38.8	61.3	48.6	54.1
Montana	42.9	33.8	56.5	52.5	54.3
Nebraska	53.7	47.0	78.6	41.7	59.1
Nevada	52.2	46.3	67.5	46.2	57.6
New Hampshire	44.9	40.7	60.3	33.4	51.2
New Jersey	36.6	29.6	61.5	35.5	47.4

State of legal residence	All students	Exclusively full time	Exclusively part time	Mixed full time and part time	Some part time
New Mexico	48.1	36.7	64.6	42.7	55.9
New York	32.2	25.4	49.9	33.5	42.1
North Carolina	43.0	37.0	62.7	35.6	48.9
North Dakota	43.1	35.3	-	-	61.3
Ohio	44.5	35.9	56.8	46.4	52.3
Oklahoma	50.3	47.6	61.8	44.5	54.0
Oregon	44.6	39.9	61.9	36.9	48.9
Pennsylvania	42.9	37.4	53.2	45.2	49.3
Rhode Island	40.3	40.0	51.4	30.5	40.9
South Carolina	44.3	38.0	62.4	46.5	53.2
South Dakota	57.2	61.4	78.4	39.9	52.1
Tennessee	40.7	35.2	57.9	39.8	48.2
Texas	44.1	39.2	55.2	42.4	48.4
Utah	49.9	42.6	70.2	47.7	60.2
Vermont	48.8	48.0	51.5	44.7	49.4
Virginia	45.5	39.8	57.5	43.3	50.5
Washington	40.4	34.5	62.1	36.3	49.0
West Virginia	45.3	38.9	60.2	55.3	57.5
Wisconsin	46.6	36.4	59.6	52.8	56.4
Wyoming	43.1	35.1	75.0	36.9	54.6

Notes: Data are from the 2019-20 National Student Postsecondary Aid Study, accessed through NCES PowerStats. PowerStats does not report estimates if the underlying sample size is too small for the estimates to be reliable. Consequently, full-time worker share for exclusively part-time students and students with mixed enrollment is not available for North Dakota.