

Chapter 7

Part-Time Students and Performance-Based Funding 2.0 in United States Public Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Meeting the college completion goals set by the United States Government, the Lumina Foundation, and others will require the completion of an additional eight million associate's or bachelor's degrees (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). As part-time students will make up to 40 percent of college students by 2023 (NCES, 2015), educational policymakers will need to adjust their completion agenda to account for the high number of part-time students in higher education. Drawing from the literature on part-time students and performance-based funding, the authors in this chapter propose that better attention to part-time students and factors that signal their success, combined with performance-based funding that acknowledges the need for the success of more part-time students, would be a worthwhile approach for increasing the accessibility of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Measuring Up 2006 from the National Center on Public Policy and Higher Education, reported that the United States was in the top five nations based on the proportion of individuals who attend college, yet it dropped to 16th in the proportion who complete college (Hauptman, 2012). The United States government, the Lumina Foundation, and multiple states have called for increasing the number of graduates or the proportion of Americans who have postsecondary education. President Barack Obama has a goal for 60 percent of adults to have an associate's degree or higher by the year 2020 but the United States

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Department of Education estimated that as of September 2015, only 45.6 percent of U.S. adults will have reached that level (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). As college graduates across multiple demographics have been shown to make higher earnings and remain employed during recessions compared to non-college graduates, increasing the number of college graduates is imperative for a successful global economy (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Heller, 2009; Perna & Jones, 2013). Meeting the goal set by President Obama will require the completion of an additional eight million associate's or bachelor's degrees (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). As part-time students will make up to 40 percent of college students by 2023 (NCES, 2015), educational policymakers need to adjust their agendas to account for the high number of part-time students in higher education.

Meeting goals of more Americans with degrees will require additional graduation of students who do not attend college full-time. In their study of the Illinois performance-based funding policy, Blankenberger and Phillips (2014) noted that it would be crucial for that state to address particular demographics (who mirror the types of students who generally attend higher education part-time) to meet that its goal for sixty percent of working age adults to hold a postsecondary credential by the year 2025. "To meet its lofty goals for completion, [Illinois] must address traditionally underrepresented students, including minorities, low-income, underprepared, and adult students" (Blakenberger & Phillips, 2014, p. 9).

The Lumina Foundation, similar to the completion goals set by the federal government, has a stated policy goal for sixty percent of U.S. adults to have a two or four-year degree by the year 2025 (Kelly & Schneider, 2012; Lumina Foundation, 2013). Complete College America, established in 2009, is backed by foundations such as Lumina and Bill and Melinda Gates, and was created to improve degree completion and efficiency in higher education (Nwosu & Koller, 2014). These initiatives and the goals set by them have shifted the conversation about United States higher education, and particularly public higher education, to being less about access and more about degree completion (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). Complete College America, the Lumina Foundation, and Gates Foundation have specifically endorsed and even funded states' efforts towards performance funding as a way to achieve these goals (Dougherty & Natow, 2015).

There is little information available about the strategies that are truly successful in significantly increasing degree attainment, but it is known that currently used and available tools are unlikely to be sufficient in meeting the challenge (Kelly & Schneider, 2012). Therefore, new approaches and perhaps a focus on changing demographics are important considerations for policy makers. As noted by Brian Bosworth (2012):

Meeting these [post-secondary education completion] goals will be a huge challenge. Even with the most optimistic assumptions about high school graduation, college continuation, and degree completion, there simply are not enough traditional students to meet ambitious goals within existing patterns of attainment. A realistic appraisal of demographic trends and historic attainment patterns can lead only to a conclusion that increasing workforce attainment - or even maintaining current levels of attainment - requires big changes in the postsecondary enrollment and completion of two groups in particular: minority youth and working adults. (p. 105)

Drawing from this and the literature on part-time students and performance funding, we suggest that better attention to part-time students and factors that signal their success, combined with performance-based funding that acknowledges the need for the success of more part-time students, is a worthwhile approach to consider in the future of higher education accessibility.

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