



# Even ONE Semester

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Full-Time Enrollment and Student Success



**2017**  
NATIONAL  
REPORT

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In 1901, J. Stanley Brown, superintendent of Joliet Township High School, and William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, created Joliet Junior College (JJC), the nation's first public college to accommodate students who wanted to remain within the *community* yet still pursue a college education. With only six students in the beginning, I assume all attended full-time.

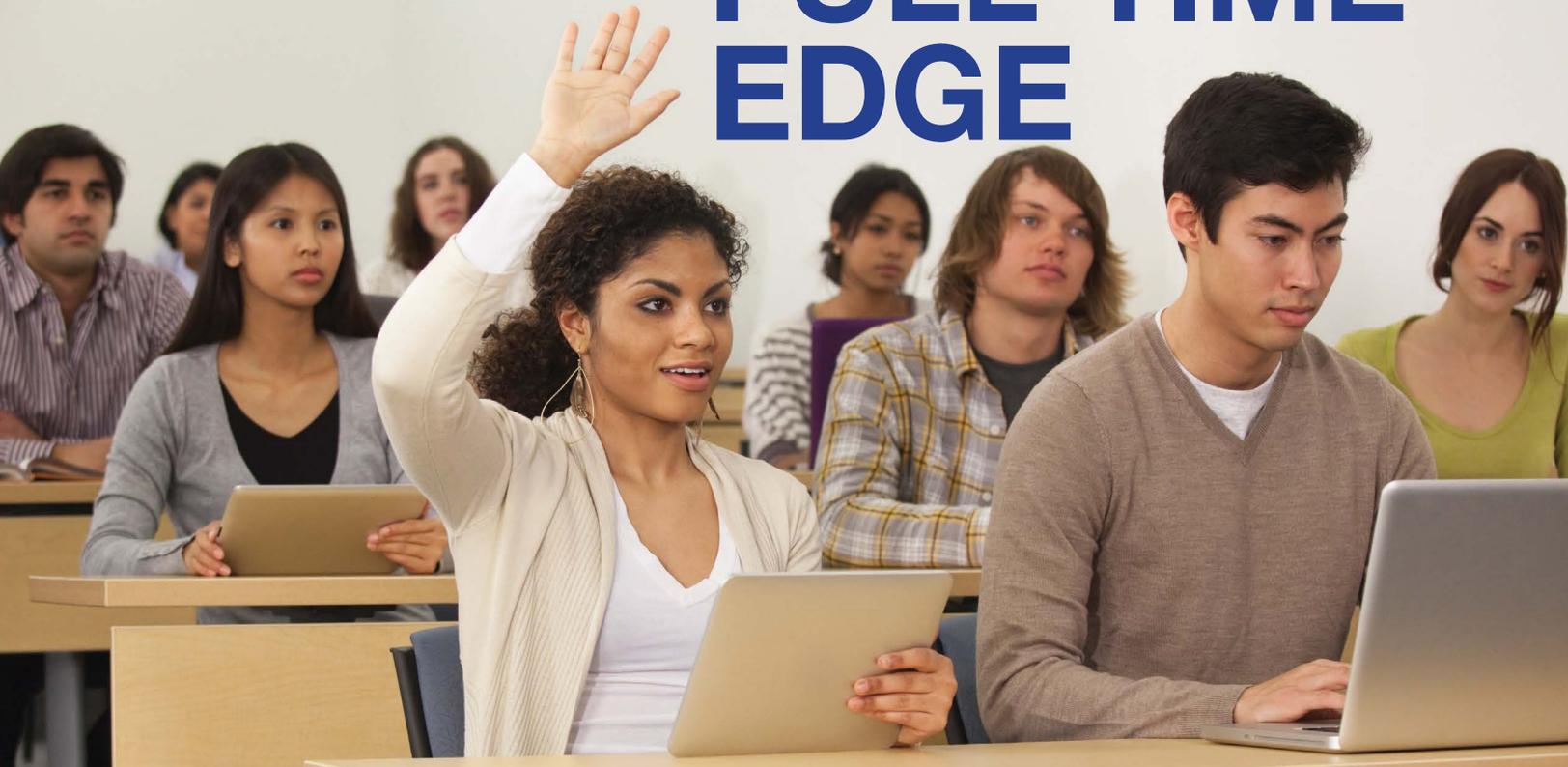
Here we are now, 116 years after the birth of JJC. Community colleges are still serving their *communities*, yet now a large majority of students attend part-time. The lives of today's students are complex. They work, have families, and care for parents—all while taking classes.

This report is dedicated to all the students who desire to be full-time but, because of competing demands in their lives, attend part-time. The report is also dedicated to the colleges that recognize the complexity of their students' lives and are making strides to help more part-time students attend full-time—or have an experience that is comparable to that of their full-time peers.

This report would not have been possible without transcript data provided by 28 community colleges. We would also like to thank Front Range Community College in Colorado for allowing the Center for Community College Student Engagement (the Center) to conduct focus groups on attendance patterns.

Evelyn N. Waiwaiole  
*Executive Director*  
*Center for Community College Student Engagement*

# Making the Most of **THE FULL-TIME EDGE**



Student engagement and transcript data from the Center for Community College Student Engagement demonstrate the benefits of attending college full-time. Students who attend full-time for even one semester have an edge—the full-time edge—that is reflected in their higher rates of engagement, completion of gateway courses, persistence, and credential attainment.

Given these findings, colleges should consider asking every student one straightforward question: *“Is there any way you could attend college full-time, even for one semester?”*

## **A Fresh View of Attendance Patterns**

Our national dialogue about higher education continues to focus on college completion, and it does so for good reason. If our country has an under-educated workforce, we collectively lose our edge in global competitiveness. Equally important are the individual costs. Students who do not attain their educational goals cannot take advantage of all that a college degree brings, including better jobs, higher incomes, and the many benefits that accompany them.

Community colleges have long known that full-time students are more likely to complete college than are their part-time peers. In fact, a number of new completion efforts focus on full-time attendance throughout college (see page 5). However, current Center findings show that students benefit from even one semester of full-time attendance.

Many in the field of higher education tend to regard part-time and full-time as fixed classifications. But the reality is that attendance patterns are fluid for many students.

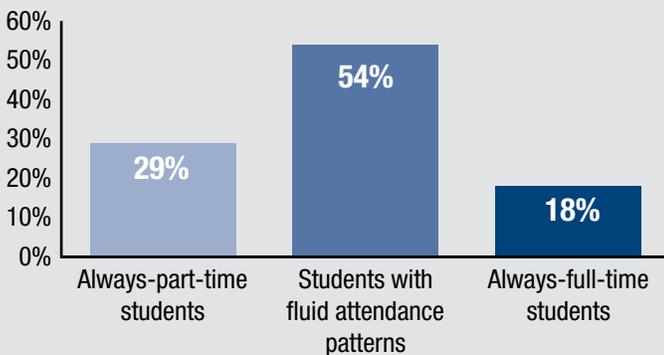
# Redefining Attendance Patterns

While the higher education field tends to think of part-time and full-time as fixed classifications, many students switch their enrollment status over time. Throughout this report, the Center refers to three types of enrollment status:

- **Always-part-time.** Students who have attended college part-time in every term they have enrolled and never attended full-time.
- **Fluid attendance pattern.** Students who have attended college part-time in some semesters and full-time in others. Some students change their status once; others move back and forth between part-time and full-time enrollment.
- **Always-full-time.** Students who have attended college full-time in every term they have enrolled and never attended part-time.

## Most Students Have Fluid Attendance Patterns

Among students who have attended their college for three terms ( $N=18,887$ )



Percentages do not total 100% due to rounding.

## Students Who Start Full-Time Do Not Necessarily Stay Full-Time

35%

First-term students who attend full-time ( $N=22,450$ )

18%

Third-term students who attend full-time ( $N=18,887$ )

Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

Some begin college as either part-time or full-time students and then switch. Others move between the two categories multiple times throughout their college experience.

Because of this fluidity, colleges may not realize how prevalent the part-time student experience is on their campuses. In fact, 2016 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) data show that more than 80% of third-term students report being part-time for at least some of their college experience—a figure that is considerably higher than the widely accepted binary classification (roughly two-thirds of students attend college part-time, and one-third attend full-time).<sup>1</sup>

## Even One Semester Creates the Full-Time Edge

Data in this report confirm the benefits of full-time attendance: Survey data show that always-full-time students have consistently higher levels of engagement than always-part-time students. Transcript data show that always-full-time students are more likely to complete gateway courses, persist, and earn credentials than their always-part-time peers. These data points, however, do not tell the full story.

Students with fluid attendance patterns frequently fall between the two extremes—and they often look more like always-full-time students than like always-part-time students. *These findings indicate that any experience as a full-time student provides a benefit.*

Given the demonstrable value of the full-time edge—and the fact that the vast majority of community college students attend part-time at least some of the time—how can colleges help students do better regardless of their

“

I went full-time when I first got out of high school. [But] as you get older, life changes and you just only have so much time for school. I wish I could go full-time to finish quicker, but I just don't have time.

— STUDENT

”



I think, maybe, not ‘easier’ is the word, but easier to stay focused on school when you were going full-time.

— STUDENT

enrollment status? One approach is to encourage more students to attend full-time. However, because full-time attendance will not be realistic for many students, colleges also can work to help more part-time students have an educational experience—particularly in terms of how they interact with faculty and staff—that more closely mirrors that of full-time students.

### Preparing Students With Information

One factor that is essential for student success is making sure students have the information they need to act in their own best interests.

Since the Center began its work in 2001, survey data and focus group responses have consistently indicated that community college students do not always know how to be successful in college and, more important, many do not know how to access the resources that will improve their educational experience and outcomes. Often they do not even know what questions to ask.

Colleges can help students better understand what it takes to succeed in college—and improve their odds of doing so—by asking every student the question noted earlier: *“Is there any way you could attend college full-time, even for one semester?”*

Asking this question invites students to better calibrate their expectations for succeeding in college. It opens a

## What Is Behind the Full-Time Edge?

Students who attend college full-time have better outcomes. These factors may contribute to their success:

- Many colleges have different requirements for full-time and part-time students, such as mandating orientation for only first-time, full-time students. Orientation introduces students to a range of services and supports, all of which lead to a more engaging experience for students who use them. Because it is more likely to be mandatory only for full-time students, part-time students are less likely to attend and become familiar with these services.
- Full-time students spend more time on campus so they are more likely to be engaged with campus activities and to use support services. They also are more likely to be on campus during the day, when more services and more faculty are available.
- Full-time students have more opportunities to build relationships with other students, collaborate on projects, or study in groups.
- Full-time students are more likely to be exposed to full-time faculty, opening more possibilities for building connections with faculty outside of class.

conversation about a range of critical issues, such as the number of credits needed to earn a degree, the school and life demands on the student's time, and the types of engaging experiences that can improve the student's likelihood of success.

Colleges also can engage students in conversations about what they think it takes to succeed as a part-time student. Center focus groups indicate that full-time students identify primarily as college students and develop habits that promote engagement, such as spending time on campus, taking advantage of student supports, and making coursework a top priority. A student who always considers him or herself a part-time student might identify as a worker who goes to school and is likely to see college as one of multiple competing demands.

Students who attend full-time early in their college experience might form habits that lead to greater engagement—and stick with those habits throughout the remainder of their college career, even during terms of part-time enrollment.

Additional research is needed to further assess the extent of the benefit of attending full-time for even one semester as well as how helpful each additional full-time term may be. In the meantime, colleges that engage students in conversations about enrollment status can explore ways to help students who cannot attend full-time adopt the behaviors of full-time students.

## Time to Degree: Expectations and Reality

Center data show that students have unrealistic expectations about the time needed to earn a degree, with always-part-time students having the least realistic expectations. Moreover, the earlier students are in their college experience, the less practical they are about time to completion.

For example, among always-part-time students who have been enrolled two terms, 47% expect to earn an associate degree one to

two years from the time they started college. That figure is 38% for always-part-time students who have been enrolled three terms.

This finding suggests that experience gives students more realistic expectations. Thus, having better information before beginning college likely would help new students better calibrate their expectations—and possibly their actions.



“If someone wants to pay my bills, that would be great. I’ve really been working this semester on trying to do scholarships and trying to get more help financially, but that’s also time, so it’s the time/money balance.”

— STUDENT



## Completion Initiatives That Encourage Full-Time Attendance

When students do not complete college, they lose not only the benefits of a credential, but also the money they invested in their unfinished education—and they may still have student loans to repay. Former Secretary of Education John King was referring to this multi-layer setback when he said, “The most expensive degree remains the one you don’t get.”<sup>2</sup>

Given the correlation between full-time attendance and completion, some new initiatives are designed to encourage full-time attendance. These include the following:

- Complete College America has proposed that Congress create a new on-time status for Pell Grants. The on-time Pell would allow students 30 funded credits per year—completed with or without summer coursework—so students could earn an associate degree in two years. (Currently, the Pell Grant covers only 12 credits per term or 24 credits per year. Therefore, students who want to graduate on time must fund the remaining six credits per year without support from a Pell Grant.)<sup>3</sup>
- Some states, such as West Virginia, have started to charge students a flat-rate tuition for full-time attendance, whether they take 12 or 15 credits. Thus, full-time students who can expand

their course load from 12 to 15 credits get the last three credits for free.<sup>4</sup>

- Some states, such as Tennessee, have created last-dollar scholarship programs for certain populations of students. Through these programs, which require full-time attendance, the state pays any part of tuition and fees that is not covered by other grants and scholarships.<sup>5</sup>
- The City University of New York (CUNY) Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) offers structured course enrollment and comprehensive student supports, but students must enroll full-time to participate. Students benefit from services such as high-touch advising; tutoring; and financial supports including tuition waivers, textbook vouchers, and monthly MetroCards to cover transportation costs. MDRC concluded that “ASAP’s impacts on graduation rates are unparalleled among experimental evaluations in higher education,” with the program graduating 40% of ASAP students, compared with 22% of students in a control group.<sup>6</sup>

# Methodology & Respondent and Institutional Characteristics

Data presented in this report are derived from two sources. The first source is the 2016 *CCSSE* administration. The second source is transcript data for students who completed *CCSSE* between 2005 and 2013. These data sources are briefly described below. Complete details are available in the full methodology documentation on the Center website, [www.ccsse.org/nr2017](http://www.ccsse.org/nr2017).

## Survey data

Data from the 2016 survey administration include 60,730 respondents in their second or third academic term from 253 colleges in 38 states and three U.S. territories; all of these respondents attended colleges where the part-timeliness special-focus items were administered. Unless otherwise noted, all survey results presented in this report are based on this response set.

## Transcript data

The transcript data used in this report are from 28 colleges. These data include complete transcripts for 17,085 students whose first year of enrollment was between 2005 and 2011

and who completed *CCSSE* between 2005 and 2013 and provided a valid student identifier on the survey. These students were enrolled at their colleges for up to 20 terms. It is important to emphasize that these data are not for all students at these colleges but only those students who completed *CCSSE* and provided a valid student identifier on the survey. In addition, *CCSSE* is administered in the spring, which means that students who started in the fall but did not persist to the spring did not have the opportunity to complete the survey.

While overall survey respondents are, with few exceptions, representative at the college level, the subset of students who provide valid identifiers may not be. While the results presented here are valid for the sample of students included in the analyses, generalizability may be limited by the distribution of student respondents and an over-representation of large, urban, and suburban colleges in this data set. These results are meaningful for the students in this data set, but a larger and more representative data set may produce different results.

## Defining Full-Time

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 38% of community college students attend college full-time.<sup>7</sup> However, colleges, students, and legislators may not always define full-time the same way:

- 12 credit hours per term is considered full-time in terms of financial aid; however, 12 credit hours per term (fall and spring) is not enough to earn an associate degree in two years.
- 15 credit hours per term is necessary for a student who wants to complete a typical associate degree in two years (without summer coursework).

For this report, the Center is using two definitions of full-time:

- Students' reports of their own enrollment status for 2016 *CCSSE* data
- 12 credit hours per term (the same as the definition for financial aid) for 2005–13 transcript data



I just became a part-time student for this semester. It's the first semester I'm a part-time student, and this is also the first semester I'm working full-time. It's a whole new experience. It's really [hard] to want to go home after a full day of work and want to do homework, especially when it's things like calculus or programming that require a lot of mental thought.

— STUDENT





## Respondent Characteristics

2016 Administration Survey Data	Always-full-time	Fluid attendance pattern	Always-part-time	N
<b>GENDER</b>				
Female (55%)	43%	38%	18%	32,054
Male (45%)	45%	39%	16%	26,598
<b>AGE</b>				
Traditional-age (76%)	46%	39%	14%	44,778
Nontraditional-age (24%)	36%	37%	26%	13,821
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>				
American Indian or other Native American (2%)	46%	40%	14%	915
Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (8%)	40%	43%	17%	4,725
Black or African American, Non-Hispanic (12%)	41%	41%	18%	7,099
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (19%)	37%	43%	21%	10,770
White, Non-Hispanic (55%)	48%	36%	16%	32,029
Other (4%)	41%	42%	17%	2,516

Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%. Always-full-time students are overrepresented in survey data due to sampling bias.

Transcript Data	Always-full-time	Fluid attendance pattern	Always-part-time	N
<b>GENDER</b>				
Female (59%)	13%	69%	18%	10,038
Male (41%)	18%	66%	16%	6,984
<b>AGE</b>				
Traditional-age (63%)	17%	70%	13%	10,732
Nontraditional-age (37%)	11%	64%	25%	6,229
<b>RACE/ETHNICITY</b>				
American Indian or other Native American (<1%)	15%	75%	10%	80
Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (4%)	14%	73%	13%	623
Black or African American, Non-Hispanic (10%)	12%	68%	19%	1,724
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish (21%)	9%	74%	18%	3,453
White, Non-Hispanic (61%)	18%	65%	17%	10,248
Other (3%)	17%	64%	19%	583

Due to rounding, percentages may not total 100%.

## Institutional Characteristics

	28 transcript colleges	2016 CCSSE administration colleges
<b>INSTITUTIONAL SIZE</b>		
Small	29%	52%
Medium	21%	20%
Large	36%	18%
Extra large	14%	10%
<b>LOCATION</b>		
Urban	21%	16%
Suburban	32%	23%
Rural	46%	61%



I need a break because if I do classes all day, then by the time I get home, I'm just tired, and I don't want to do homework.

— STUDENT



# THE FULL-TIME EDGE & Student Engagement



The field typically treats enrollment categories as binary—part-time or full-time—but that is not the experience of 2016 CCSSE respondents. More than one-third of those enrolled two or three terms moved between the two enrollment categories. Transcript data findings, which represent students enrolled up to 20 terms, show that two-thirds of those students switched at least once. The Center’s findings, therefore, look at three types of enrollment: always-full-time students, always-part-time students, and students with fluid attendance patterns.

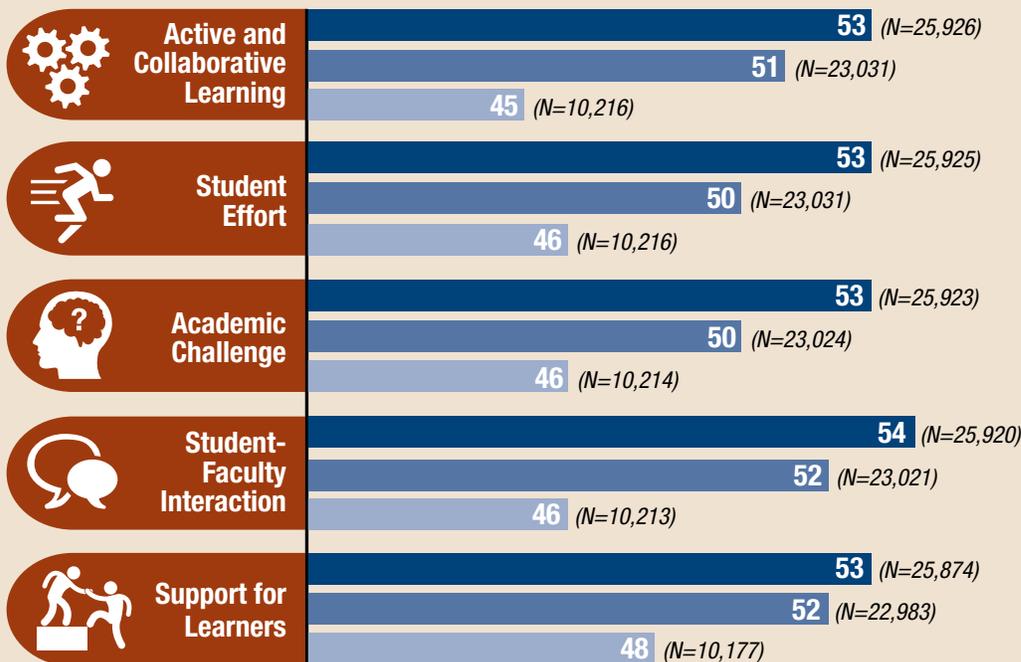
Across all benchmarks and many items within the benchmarks, full-time students are more engaged than are part-time students. Students with fluid attendance patterns typically fall between their always-part-time and always-full-time peers.

Moreover, students with fluid attendance patterns often look more like their always-full-time peers than their always-part-time peers, suggesting that having any experience as a full-time student improves student engagement.

## More Full-Time Attendance Leads to More Engagement

For every benchmark, always-full-time students are the most engaged, and always-part-time students are the least engaged. Students with fluid attendance patterns fall in between but are closer to always-full-time students.

■ Always-full-time students ■ Students with fluid attendance patterns ■ Always-part-time students



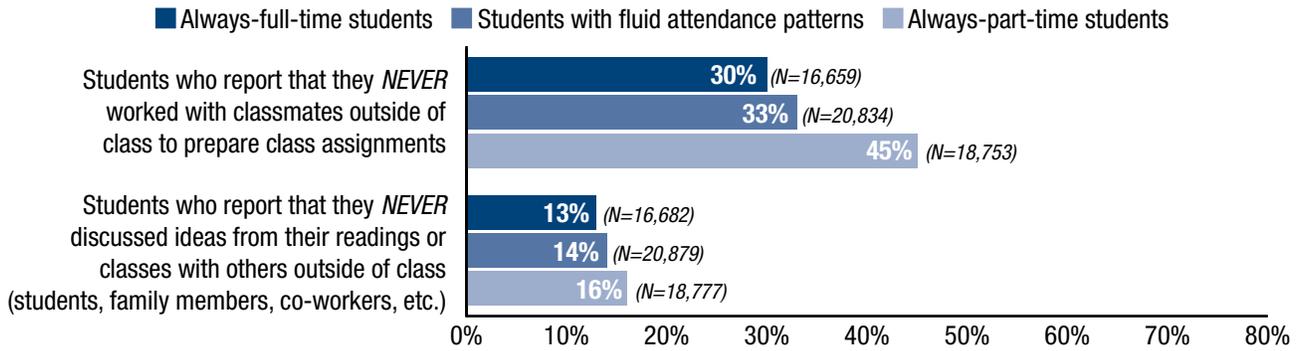
Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

# Engagement by Benchmark

Below, survey items with statistically significant differences among enrollment categories are presented by benchmark. In most cases, the data focus on the percentage of students who reported that they *never* had certain engaging experiences.



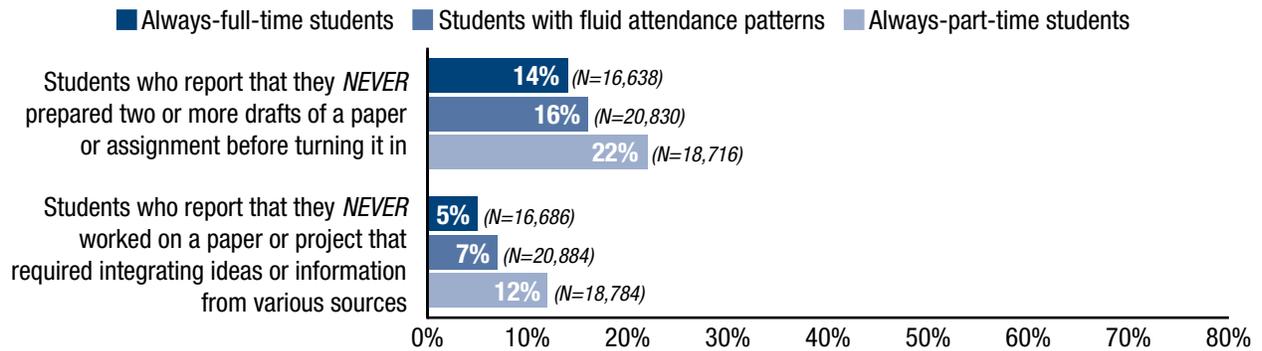
## Active and Collaborative Learning



Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents



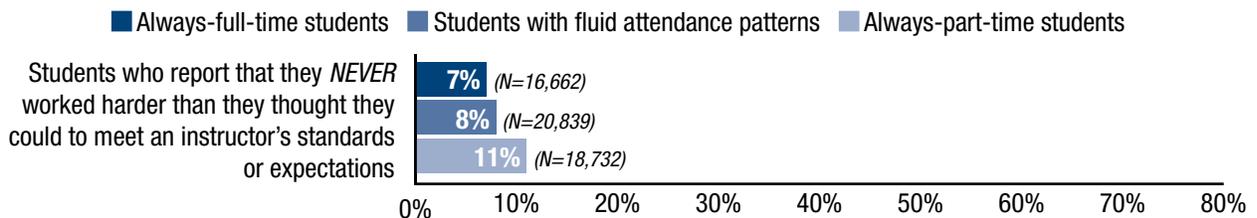
## Student Effort



Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

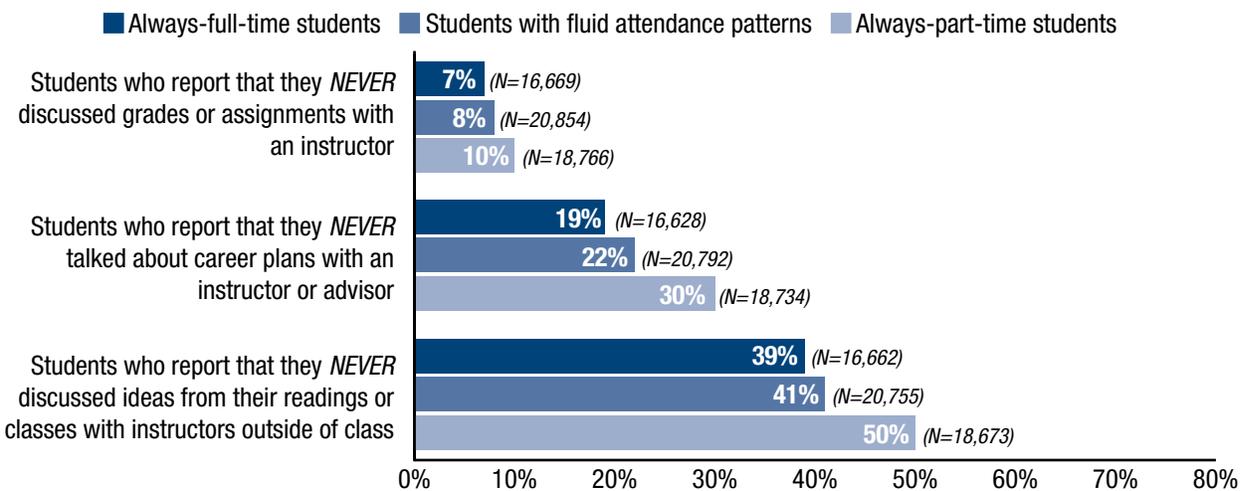


## Academic Challenge



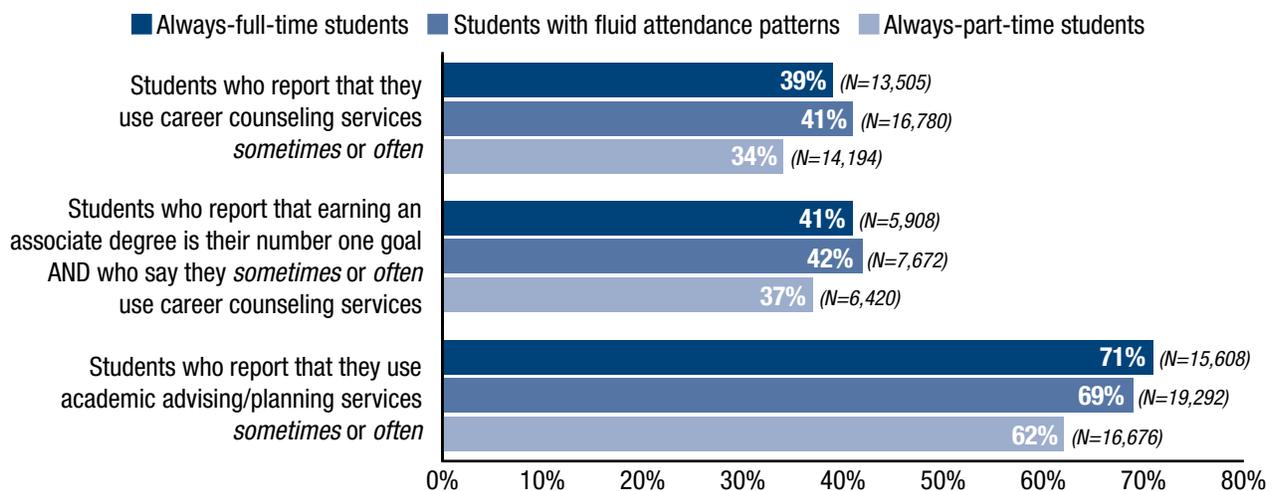
Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

## Student-Faculty Interaction



Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

## Support for Learners



Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

“ [Being part-time] is not easy.... I was a lot better at my studying, and I was a lot better in my classes when I had the ability to just completely sit down and focus 100% on my classes.

— STUDENT



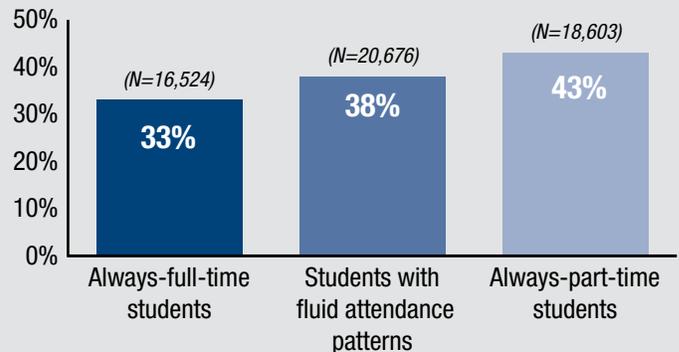
# Faculty's Part-Timeness Affects Interaction With Students

In *Contingent Commitments*,<sup>8</sup> the Center reported that part-time faculty are less likely to engage with students than are full-time faculty. Among other reasons, at many colleges, full-time faculty are more likely to have offices and spend more time on campus.

Engaging with part-time faculty outside of class may be easier for students if they are aware of the faculty members' schedules. However, many students do not know if their instructors teach full-time or part-time—and always-part-time students are least likely to have this information.

## Do you know if your instructors this academic term teach full-time or part-time at this college?

I do NOT know this about any of my instructors.



Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

## STUDENTS' AND FACULTY MEMBERS' VIEWS



I know that my biology teacher, she's part-time because **she doesn't have an office of her own**. She just uses a spare room in the science department.

— FULL-TIME STUDENT



A lot of students don't know whether their instructors are full-time or part-time. [They] wander into our department looking for their part-time instructor's office, expecting them to be there all day. **They're not aware that that instructor's not here all the time.**

— FACULTY MEMBER



**We might tell them, 'I'm full-time faculty,' or 'I'm a part-time instructor,' but they may not necessarily know what that means.** Does that change the access that I have to you? Does that change the way I'm supposed to communicate with you? Does that change where I can find you, and when? I don't know that students know the difference, the true difference between a full-time faculty member and a part-time instructor, in terms of access and how to get [in touch with] them.

— FACULTY MEMBER

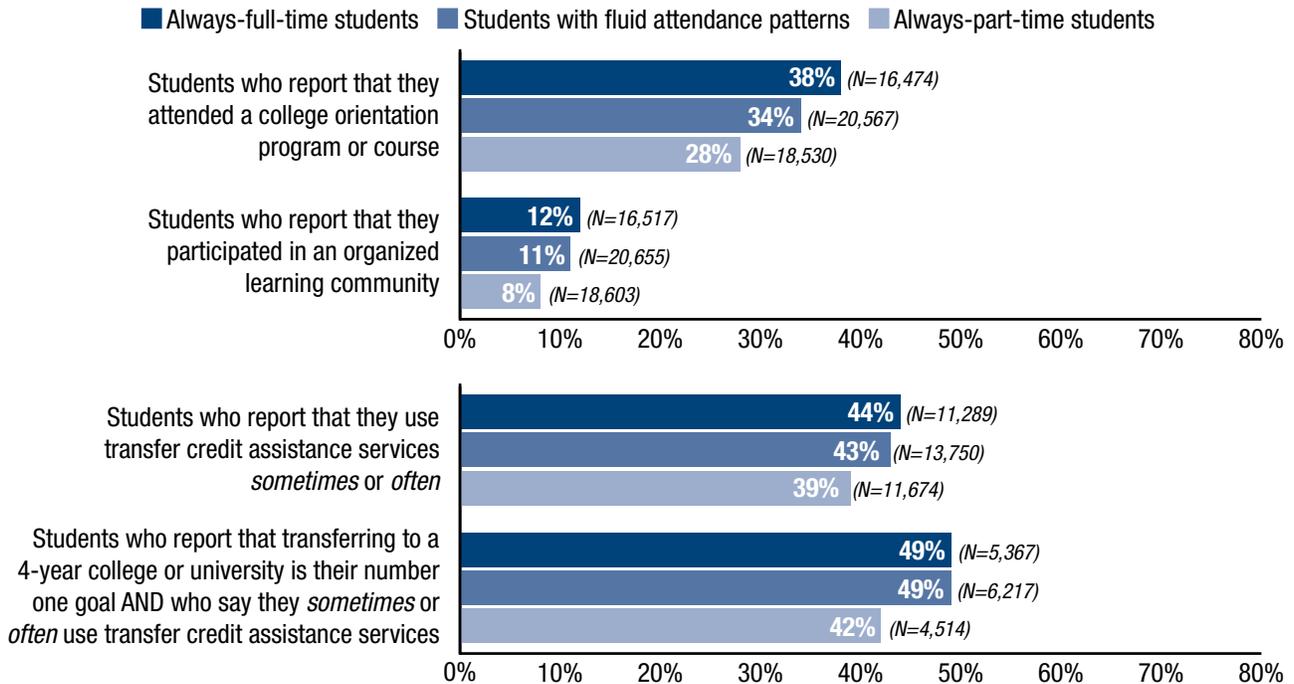


The **full-time faculty, you definitely see them more** around campus. Usually, the adjunct teachers—and I don't think they mean it maliciously—but they're like, 'Oh, I have to run to this other school because I have to pick up another class.' As far as content, I've never felt like they just don't have time for me or they didn't put enough time into their lecture.

— PART-TIME STUDENT

## Additional Student Services and Experiences

(Not benchmark items)



Source: 2016 CCSSE special-focus item respondents

“ Making it a point to actually be on campus is kind of hard. Utilizing anything like the writing center, the math lab, or anything like that is tough because I have two other jobs outside of this. So having only two classes here, it’s tough to force myself to be here any additional time than I need to.

— STUDENT

# THE FULL-TIME EDGE

## & Completion and Other Outcomes

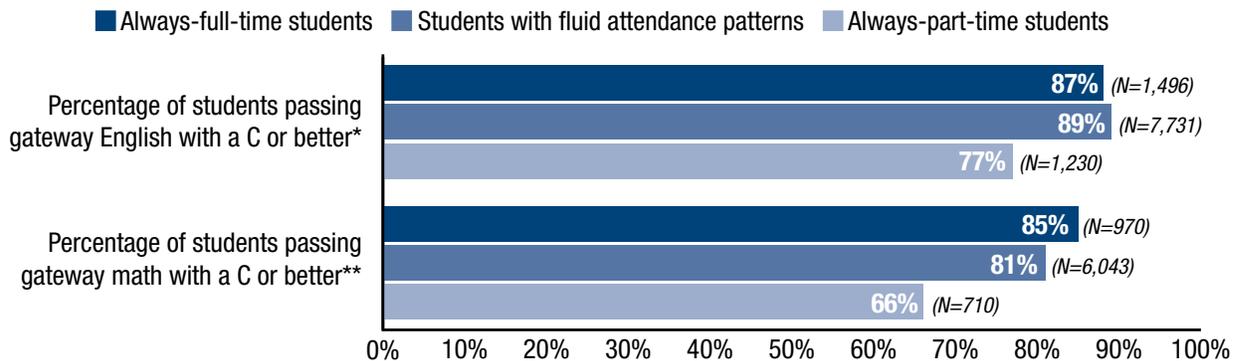
Transcript data show that having any full-time enrollment improves student outcomes, including completion of gateway courses, persistence, and completion of a certificate or degree.



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### Gateway Completion

Students who enroll full-time at least some of the time are more likely to complete gateway courses than those who are always-part-time.



\*Note: Students who never attempted a gateway English course are excluded from this analysis.

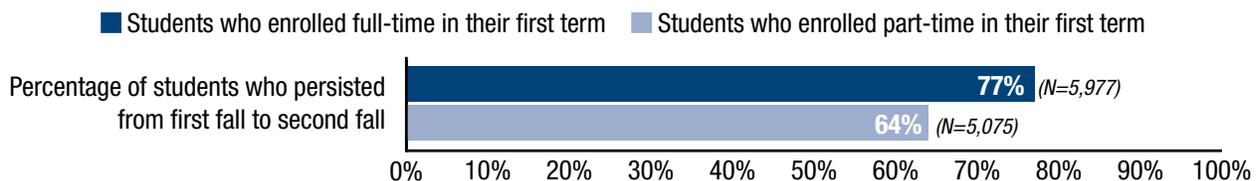
\*\*Note: Students who never attempted a gateway math course are excluded from this analysis.

Source: 2005–13 CCSSE-matched transcript data

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### Fall-to-Fall Persistence

Students who enroll full-time in their first term are more likely to persist to the second fall term than those who enroll part-time in their first term.

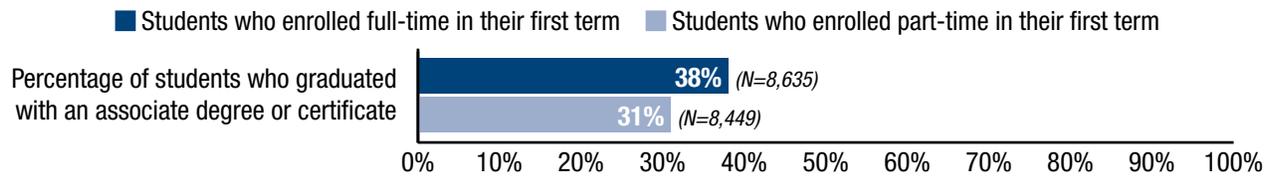


Note: Includes only students who started at their college in a fall term.

Source: 2005–13 CCSSE-matched transcript data

## College Completion: First-Term, Full-Time

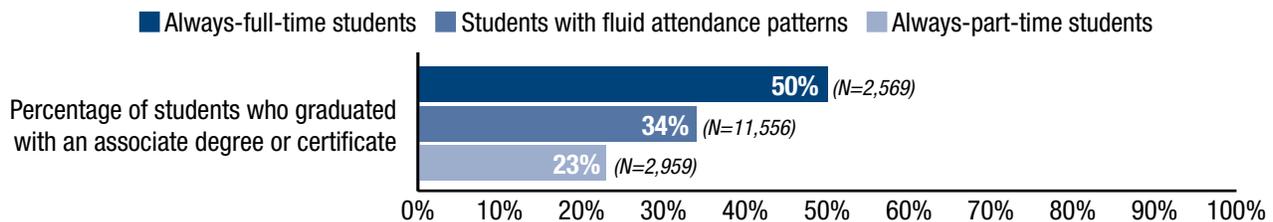
Students who enroll full-time in their first term are more likely to complete college than those who enroll part-time in their first term.



Source: 2005–13 CCSSE-matched transcript data

## College Completion: Full-Time, Any Time

Students who enroll full-time at least some of the time are more likely to complete college than those who are always-part-time. Recent findings from the National Student Clearinghouse show similar results.<sup>9</sup>

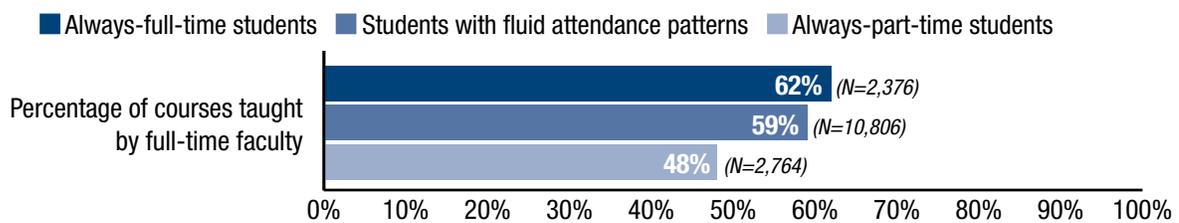


Source: 2005–13 CCSSE-matched transcript data

### THE INTERSECTION OF

## Full-Time Students and Full-Time Faculty

Students who enroll full-time at least some of the time are more likely to be taught by full-time faculty.



Source: 2005–13 CCSSE-matched transcript data



I'm working just as hard as I was last semester, but now I'm working full-time on top of it. It's really hard to find that balance and timing between everything.

— STUDENT

# THE FULL-TIME EDGE

## Questions for Colleges

Students gain advantages by attending college full-time for at least one semester—the full-time edge. How can colleges use this fact to improve student outcomes?

Some colleges and programs encourage more students to attend full-time. However, without considerable financial support, that option is unrealistic for every student. Nevertheless, colleges may be able to better serve the majority of their students by designing a part-time experience that more closely mirrors the experience of full-time students.

Colleges can conduct focus groups to capture students' and faculty members' ideas on how best to improve the part-time student experience. To download focus group guides to use with your students and faculty, visit [www.ccsse.org/nr2017](http://www.ccsse.org/nr2017).

Colleges also can make sure students have the information they need to effectively plan for and approach their education. Below are questions colleges can use to spur internal conversations about how to dive into this work.

- Are there systematic processes built into our college that unintentionally encourage students to attend part-time?
- How is the part-time student experience qualitatively different from the full-time experience at our college—and what disparities do these differences create?
  - ▶ What do we require full-time students to do (such as orientation) that we do not require part-time students to do?
  - ▶ Do part-time students have the same advising experience as full-time students?
- Do part-time students have fewer opportunities to engage with faculty and other students?
- How can our college help more students attend full-time for at least one term?
  - ▶ Can we make sure every student is informed about the benefits of attending college full-time, even for one semester?
  - ▶ Can our college begin advising students earlier—perhaps when they enroll in the college rather than when they register for classes—so students have more time to explore the possibility of attending full-time?
  - ▶ Can we work with community organizations to provide funds (scholarships) for one term of full-time attendance?
  - ▶ Can we provide more student jobs for students who are interested in attending full-time for one term?
- If more students at our college could attend full-time, what steps would we need to take to ensure that we are able to meet the increased demand?
- For students who cannot attend full-time (at all), what can our college do to help part-time students have an experience that is more like that of full-time students?
  - ▶ How can we help students take the right sequence of courses so they are using their time wisely?
  - ▶ Can we require students to take advantage of support services?
  - ▶ Are we ensuring that support services are available when part-time students are on campus?
  - ▶ Are we providing professional development to make sure all full-time and part-time faculty know how to direct students to support services?



## PART-TIME STUDENTS' ADVICE TO THEIR COLLEGES

“

I think that goes back to **connecting to the advisors**. If you're a part-time student, you're not going to be on campus. You might not be able to meet in person. I think being really good about communicating over e-mail or phone would be helpful to part-time students.

”



“

I found [orientation] useful, but at the same time, it was a little bit **too much information** to take in one day.

”

“

I think having **more counselors**. We have one for the whole campus. I know I've e-mailed the last one—apparently, she quit—with no response, so that's definitely discouraging.

”

“

If you could have one advisor and not just shuffle to whoever has time. If they could take the time to [say], 'Oh, you want your associate of science. Let's look at the next year and a half and see if this is feasible.' I [wish] someone would've told me, **'You're going to be here for three years if you go at this rate.'**

”

“

Also, I think a big part would also be the advisors, possibly, having longer hours, **longer times where you can meet** with them. A normal meet would be 15 minutes. That's barely enough time for them to get you logged into the computer.

”

### Endnotes

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- 8 Center for Community College Student Engagement. (2014). *Contingent commitments: Bringing part-time faculty into focus (A special report from the Center for Community College Student Engagement)*. Austin, TX: The University of Texas at Austin, Program in Higher Education Leadership.
- 9 Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P.K., Yuan, X., Nathan, A., & Hwang, Y. (2015, November). *Completing college: A national view of student attainment rates — fall 2009 cohort* (Signature Report No. 10), 31. Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

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