

Enrollment Patterns Among Students Classified Full- and Part-Time

Background

Whether a student enrolls full- or part-time has a significant impact on his or her progress toward completing a degree. Because of this, many data systems used to track cohorts of students also track whether the student was full- or part-time. This status is typically determined during the student's first semester at the college. Based on that, initial fall enrollment tracking systems, such as the National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), assign the student a full- or part-time status that does not change while they remain enrolled at the college. While this may be appropriate in some contexts, this may not be appropriate for students in The Florida College System (FCS). Few FCS students maintain the same status throughout their time in college as compared to students in the State University System, where full-time enrollment is much more common. As a result, reports, such as those related to persistence, retention, and graduation rates that are disaggregated by full- and part-time status, may be incomplete and misleading.

Methodology

The data for this analysis uses a cohort of FCS students from fall 2007. The students were selected according to IPEDS selection criteria – they are first-time-in-college, degree-seeking students. For each student, his or her initial enrollment status was determined to be either full-time (enrolled for 12 or more credit hours) or part-time (enrolled less than 12 credit hours). The students were tracked through spring of 2010. Summer enrollments were excluded since full- and part-time status does not apply to summer. Each student had a total of five potential semesters of subsequent enrollment (spring 2008, fall 2008, spring 2009, fall 2009, spring 2010). At the end of the five semesters, the number of semesters the student enrolled was counted along with the number of semesters in which the student was full- and part-time.

Findings

Exhibit 1 shows the students initially classified full- or part-time and the number of semesters in which they enrolled and matched their initial classification. The table is divided into several sections. The left side shows results for students initially classified full-time and part-time students are on the right. Within each classification, the table is broken into five sections based on the total semesters the students enrolled. Note that all students were enrolled in fall of 2007, so the subsequent semesters start with spring 2008. Students could have enrolled in between zero (not shown) and five (through spring 2010) semesters.

For each group, there is a row to represent the number of semesters enrolled full-time or part-time, based on initial classification. For example, a full-time student who enrolled one additional semester has just

two possibilities – he or she could have enrolled full-time in either zero or one additional semester. **Exhibit 1** summarizes this information for each possible enrollment combination.

EXHIBIT 1: PATTERNS OF ENROLLMENT BASED ON INITIAL FULL- AND PART-TIME CLASSIFICATION

First-Time in College Students Classified Full-Time in Fall 2007			First-Time in College Students Classified Part-Time in Fall 2007		
Number and Percent of Subsequent Semesters Enrolled Full-Time			Number and Percent of Subsequent Semesters Enrolled Part-Time		
Semesters	# of Students	% of Students	Semesters	# of Students	% of Students
Students enrolled for one subsequent semester					
0 Full-Time	2,471	37.8%	0 Part-Time	1,338	23.2%
1 Full-Time	4,073	62.2%	1 Part-Time	4,425	76.8%
Total	6,544	100.0%	Total	5,763	100.0%
Students enrolled for two subsequent semesters					
0 Full-Time	946	26.3%	0 Part-Time	363	11.7%
1 Full-Time	1,446	40.2%	1 Part-Time	846	27.3%
2 Full-Time	1,205	33.5%	2 Part-Time	1,886	60.9%
Total	3,597	100.0%	Total	3,095	100.0%
Students enrolled for three subsequent semesters					
0 Full-Time	662	9.4%	0 Part-Time	367	11.4%
1 Full-Time	1,227	17.5%	1 Part-Time	612	19.1%
2 Full-Time	1,561	22.2%	2 Part-Time	773	24.1%
3 Full-Time	3,576	50.9%	3 Part-Time	1,457	45.4%
Total	7,026	100.0%	Total	3,209	100.0%
Students enrolled for four subsequent semesters					
0 Full-Time	426	7.9%	0 Part-Time	171	6.3%
1 Full-Time	777	14.4%	1 Part-Time	395	14.5%
2 Full-Time	1,116	20.7%	2 Part-Time	476	17.5%
3 Full-Time	1,796	33.3%	3 Part-Time	631	23.2%
4 Full-Time	1,271	23.6%	4 Part-Time	1,042	38.4%
Total	5,386	100.0%	Total	2,715	100.0%
Students enrolled for five subsequent semesters					
0 Full-Time	457	4.6%	0 Part-Time	312	6.1%
1 Full-Time	1,083	11.0%	1 Part-Time	646	12.7%
2 Full-Time	1,669	16.9%	2 Part-Time	813	15.9%
3 Full-Time	2,416	24.5%	3 Part-Time	897	17.6%
4 Full-Time	2,321	23.5%	4 Part-Time	957	18.8%
5 Full-Time	1,917	19.4%	5 Part-Time	1,478	29.0%
Total	9,863	100.0%	Total	5,103	100.0%

Source: Division of Florida Colleges

Exhibit 1 shows that many students change their enrollment status during their academic career. Among initial full-time students who enrolled one subsequent semester, 62.2% were full-time for that one semester and 37.8% changed their enrollment pattern and enrolled part-time in their second semester. Among students enrolled five additional semesters, only 19.4% were full-time in all five semesters and 4.6% never enrolled full-time again. The remainder – 75.9% were a combination of full- and part-time. This kind of shifting can be seen in every section of the exhibit. Most students end up with a combination of semesters that are full- and part-time, regardless of their initial status. In fact, **among students enrolled at least three additional semesters, only 30% of full-time students enrolled full-time in every semester and only 36% of part-time students enrolled part-time every semester.**

Though groups of students change from semester to semester, those who started part-time are somewhat more consistent. For all but one block of students, initial part-time students are more consistent than initial full-time students. The one exception can be seen with students who enrolled three subsequent semesters. This approximates two full academic years and we can see that about half (50.9%) of initial full-time students who enrolled just two years remained full-time all two years. It is likely these are more traditional aged students seeking their associate in arts degree who progressed quickly and sought to transfer to a university.

Implications

A significant amount of educational research requires tracking cohorts of students from time of entry to exit. Disaggregating these students into different groups, such as by race, gender, age, and financial status is a powerful tool for research. However, for students in The Florida College System, and probably most community colleges nationally, enrollment status at time of entry is of limited use. Expecting a “full-time” student to complete an associate degree in two years or even three assumes that the student remains full-time and this is most often not the case. As a result, students will progress at rates slower than assumed by models that consider initial full-time students to be full-time throughout their time in college. In addition, when full- and part-time students are compared, the differences are likely to be smaller than expected because so many students in both groups change status over the period of their enrollment.

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