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NCES 2007-165

# Part-Time Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education: 2003–04

## Postsecondary Education Descriptive Analysis Report

June 2007

### Executive Summary

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## Executive Summary

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After dramatic growth between 1970 and 1990, part-time students have formed a large and stable segment of the undergraduate population in U.S. postsecondary institutions (Hussar 2005). In fall 2004, approximately 5.5 million undergraduates were enrolled part time, making up 37 percent of the undergraduate enrollment in all degree-granting postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education 2006). While part-time enrollment benefits postsecondary students in that it lowers their costs, increases their access, and offers them more flexibility, it provides no guarantee of academic success. In fact, part-time enrollment is often associated with certain behaviors (e.g., interrupting enrollment, working excessively) that may deter students from finishing their degree (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002; Carroll 1989; O’Toole, Stratton, and Wetzel 2003). Although it is difficult to determine whether the growth in part-time enrollment has brought about more benefits or limitations to individuals and institutions (Davies 1999; McCormick, Geis, and Vergun 1995), ongoing research on the associations between part-time enrollment and postsecondary outcomes helps advance our understanding of this issue.

This report uses data from the 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:2004) to provide a profile of part-time undergraduates enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions in 2003–04. It also uses longitudinal data from a nationally representative sample in the 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) to examine associations between part-time enrollment and

education outcomes (i.e., persistence and degree completion) 6 years after beginning postsecondary education.

While providing an overall picture of part-time students, this report also takes a closer look at a subgroup of part-time students who exhibited some characteristics commonly found among full-time students. A relevant question is why these students chose to attend part time even though they may have been able to attend full time given their characteristics. Although this report cannot fully address this question, a descriptive look at this subgroup helps determine whether and how these students behaved differently from their full-time counterparts and other part-time peers in postsecondary education and what factors were related to degree completion. The major findings of this report are summarized below. It should be noted, however, that these findings are descriptive in nature and do not demonstrate causality.

### Overall Picture of Part-Time Undergraduates

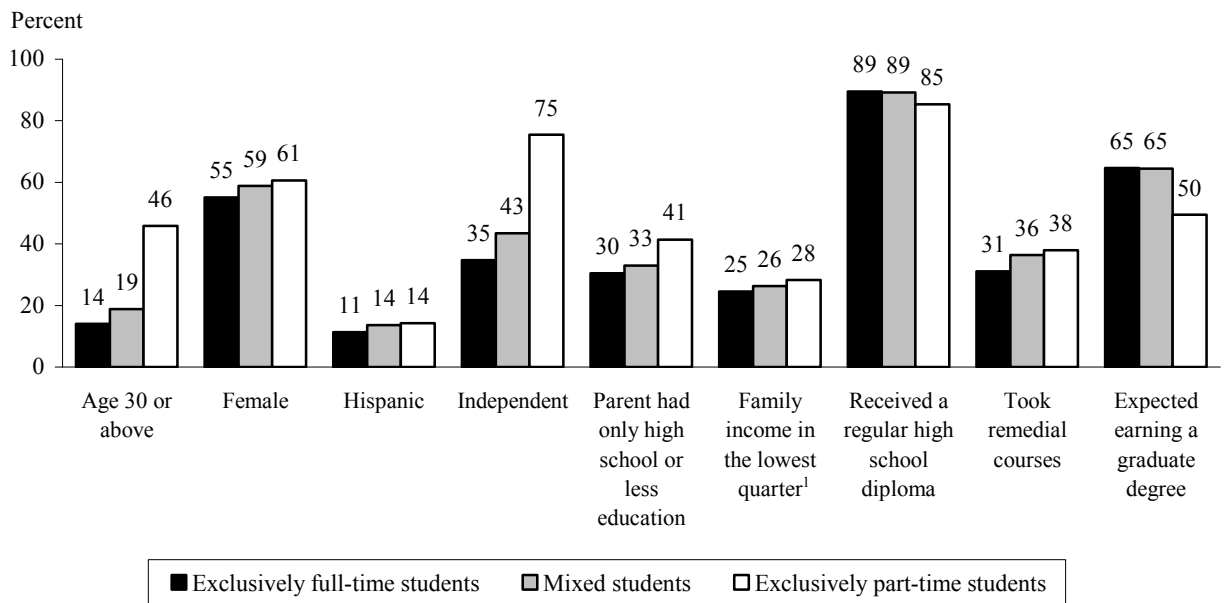
About 84 percent of undergraduates maintained the same enrollment status throughout the 2003–04 academic year: 49 percent were enrolled exclusively full time and 35 percent were enrolled exclusively part time. The remaining 16 percent changed their enrollment status during the year. According to these enrollment patterns, this report classified students into three groups: exclusively full-time

students, exclusively part-time students, and students with mixed enrollment intensity (regardless of whether they started as part-time students and subsequently changed to full-time students or vice versa).

Exclusively part-time students differed from their full-time peers in many respects. Compared with exclusively full-time students, exclusively part-time students tended to be older, female, Hispanic, financially independent, and first-generation students (i.e., their parents did not attend college) (figure A).<sup>1</sup> They also tended to

come from low-income families (for dependent students), had weaker academic preparation, and had lower expectations for postsecondary education. Students with mixed enrollment intensity typically fell in between these two groups, with some characteristics similar to those of exclusively full-time students (e.g., type of high school diploma and educational expectations) and others similar to those of exclusively part-time students (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, and remedial coursetaking).

**Figure A. Percentage of undergraduates with selected demographic and academic characteristics, by enrollment intensity: 2003–04**



<sup>1</sup> For dependent students only.

NOTE: Estimates include students from the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico. Hispanic includes Latino. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

<sup>1</sup> All comparisons made in the report were tested using Student's *t* statistic. All differences cited were statistically significant at the .05 level unless noted otherwise.

## **Part-Time Students Who Looked Like Typical Full-Time Students**

Not all part-time students could be easily distinguished from full-time students, though. In fact, about 25 percent of part-time undergraduates in 2003–04 exhibited some characteristics common to full-time students—that is, they were traditional college age (23 years old or younger), financially dependent on their parents, graduated from high school with a regular diploma, and received financial help from their parents to pay for their postsecondary education. Referred to as “part-time students who looked like full-time students,”<sup>2</sup> this report compared this subgroup with both full-time students and other part-time students to determine whether and how their postsecondary education behaviors differed from their counterparts.

Part-time students who looked like full-time students appeared to be relatively advantaged when compared with other part-time students: they were more likely to be White, have well-educated parents, come from high-income families (for dependent students only), and expect to earn an advanced degree in the future, and they were less likely to be Black and have taken remedial courses (figure B). In addition, part-time students who looked like full-time students were more likely than other part-time students to be male.

Comparing part-time students who looked like full-time students to their full-time counterparts revealed both similarities and differences: they were slightly more likely than exclusively full-time students to be Hispanic, but less likely to be Black, and were more likely

to come from families where parents held bachelor’s or higher degrees and to have taken remedial courses after high school. The two groups could not be distinguished in terms of their gender distribution, family income (for dependent students only), and educational expectations.

## **Enrollment Characteristics**

Several enrollment characteristics distinguished exclusively part-time students from their full-time peers. For example, a majority of exclusively part-time students (64 percent) attended public 2-year institutions, compared with 25 percent of exclusively full-time students (figure C). On the other hand, exclusively full-time students were more likely than exclusively part-time students to attend public or private 4-year doctoral institutions (33 vs. 11 percent).

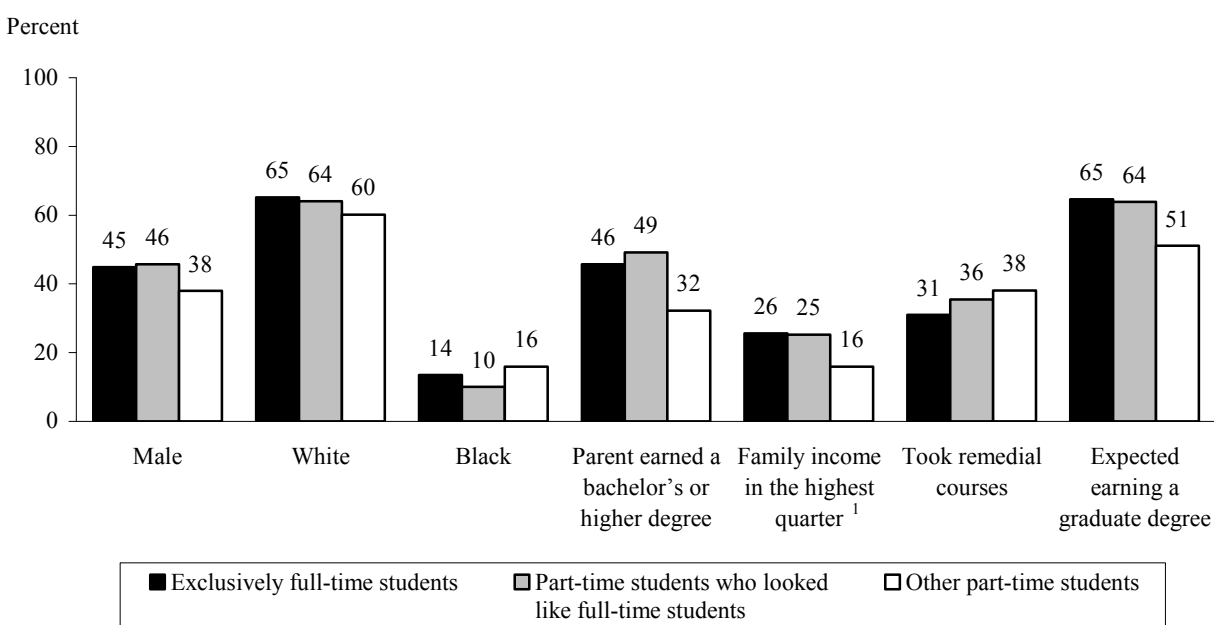
Consistent with their high concentrations in public 2-year institutions, exclusively part-time students were more likely than full-time students to be enrolled in an associate’s degree program or not be in any degree/certificate program and much less likely to be enrolled in a bachelor’s degree program. In addition, 31 percent of exclusively part-time students did not have a major field of study, compared with 16 percent of exclusively full-time students.

Although they somewhat resembled full-time students with respect to their demographics, family backgrounds, and educational expectations, part-time students who looked like full-time students retained many enrollment characteristics associated with part-time attendance, such as the tendency to attend 2-year colleges, enroll in subbaccalaureate or nondegree/certificate programs, and not have a

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that not all full-time students fit this typical profile. For example, in 2003–04, about one-half of full-time undergraduates had these characteristics.

**Figure B. Percentage of full-time and part-time undergraduates with selected demographic and academic characteristics: 2003–04**



<sup>1</sup> For dependent students only.

NOTE: Estimates include students from the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico. Black includes African American. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

major field of study (figure D). These enrollment characteristics are generally associated with lower persistence and attainment rates in postsecondary education (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002).

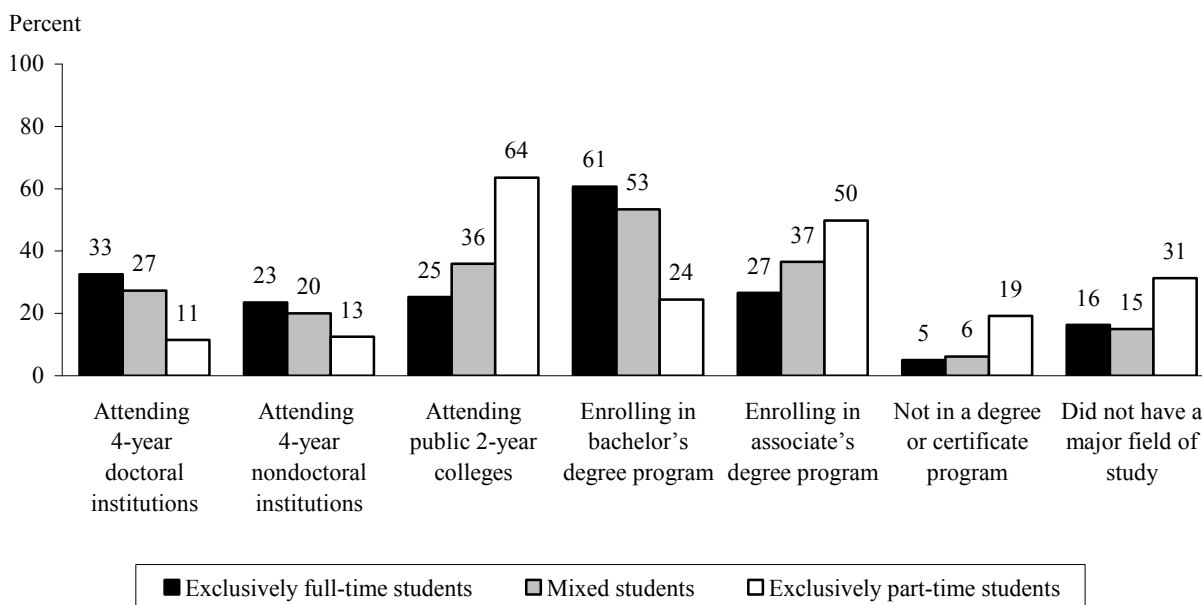
### Combining Work and School

Another important factor that distinguished part-time students from their full-time peers was employment. In 2003–04, 83 percent of exclusively part-time undergraduates worked while enrolled, more than one-half (53 percent) of them worked full time, and 47 percent considered themselves primarily employees (figure E). Although a majority of full-time

students worked while enrolled (73 percent), just under one-fourth (23 percent) worked full time and 14 percent considered themselves primarily employees.

Compared with exclusively part-time students, working intensity tended to be lower for part-time students who looked like full-time students: 21 percent held a full-time job while enrolled (not significantly different from the 23 percent of full-time students who did so); 11 percent considered themselves primarily employees (lower than the 14 percent of full-time students); and 69 percent considered themselves primarily students (higher than the 59 percent of full-time students). These patterns

**Figure C. Percentage of undergraduates with selected enrollment characteristics, by enrollment intensity: 2003–04**



NOTE: Estimates include students from the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

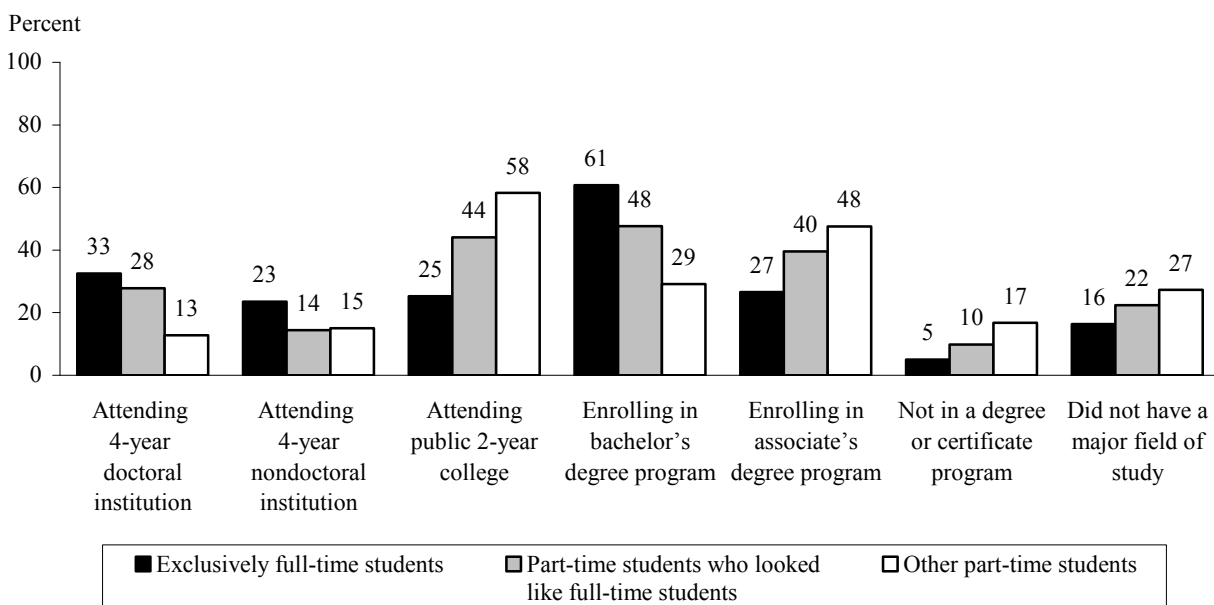
suggest that many students in this subgroup placed more importance on study than work.

Why did students work? Among students who worked but considered themselves primarily students, financial concerns appeared to be the dominant reason for working: 63 percent worked to help pay their tuition, fees, and living expenses, and 24 percent worked to earn some spending money. Less than 1 in 10 (7 percent) reported that they worked to gain job experience. Exclusively part-time students were especially concerned about their financial situations: 72 percent cited paying tuition, fees, or living expenses as the most important reason for working, compared with 59 percent of full-time students. However, part-time students who

looked like full-time students were less likely than full-time students to cite this reason (55 vs. 60 percent).

Although 35 percent of those who considered themselves primarily students thought that working helped them with career preparation, fewer (14 percent) said that it helped them with coursework. On the other hand, between 31 and 48 percent said that working restricted their academic choices including class schedule, number of classes taken, and access to school facilities, and 41 percent reported that it had a negative effect on their grades. Exclusively part-time students were more likely than full-time students to report these problems. Part-time students who looked like full-time students were

**Figure D. Percentage of full-time and part-time undergraduates with selected enrollment characteristics: 2003–04**



NOTE: Estimates include students from the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

also more likely than full-time students to report the problems of class choice, class schedule, and number of classes they could take. In summary, working while enrolled seemed to present obstacles to those who considered themselves primarily students.

### Persistence and Degree Attainment After 6 Years

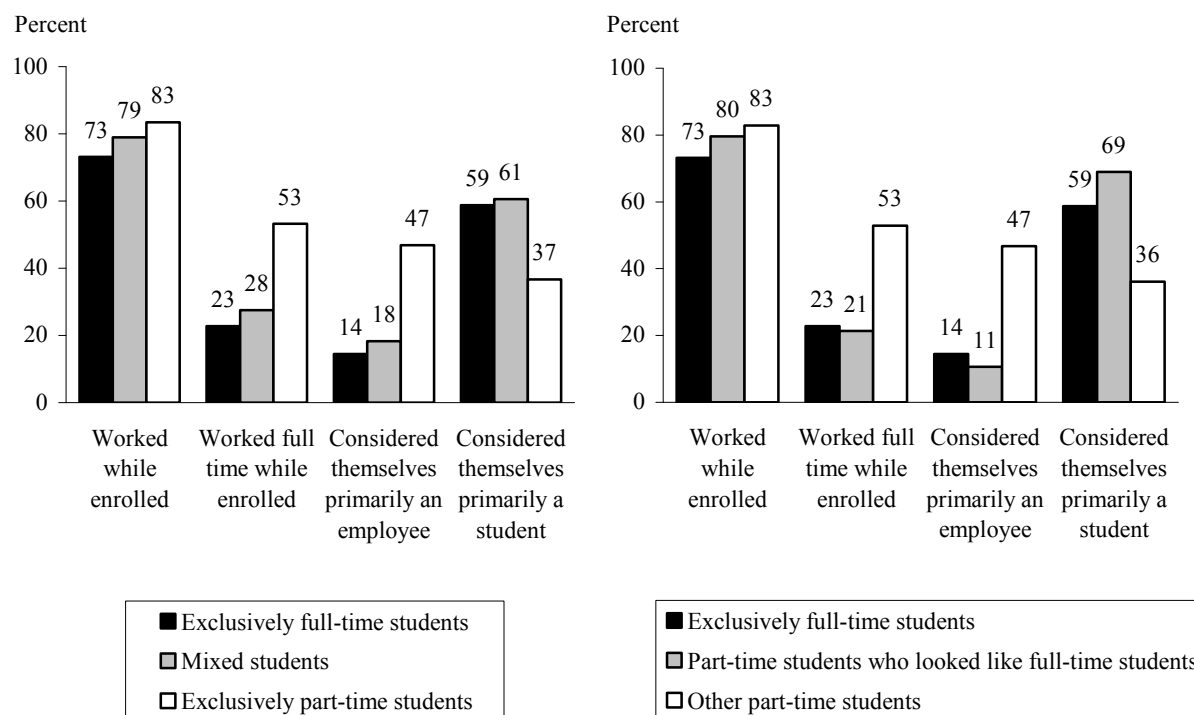
This report uses longitudinal data from the 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01) to examine persistence and degree attainment 6 years after

students entered postsecondary education.<sup>3</sup> Consistent with earlier research (Berkner, He, and Cataldi 2002; Carroll 1989; O’Toole, Stratton, and Wetzel 2003), this report found that part-time enrollment was negatively associated with long-term degree attainment and

<sup>3</sup> Because BPS:96/01 covers a longer interval of enrollment data than NPSAS:2004, the sample included a higher percentage of students who changed their enrollment status (i.e., students with mixed enrollment intensity) than in NPSAS:2004 (41 vs. 16 percent). Overall, 59 percent of BPS:96/01 students maintained the same enrollment status for the duration of their enrollment from 1995–96 to 2000–01: some 47 percent were enrolled exclusively full time, and 12 percent were enrolled exclusively part time. Like part-time students in NPSAS:2004, part-time students in BPS:96/01 were further divided into two subgroups: those who looked like full-time students and those who did not. A total of 47 percent of part-time students in BPS:96/01 were identified as part-time students who looked like full-time students.



**Figure E. Percentage of undergraduates who worked while enrolled, worked full time while enrolled, or considered themselves primarily a student or an employee, by enrollment intensity: 2003–04**



NOTE: Estimates include students from the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

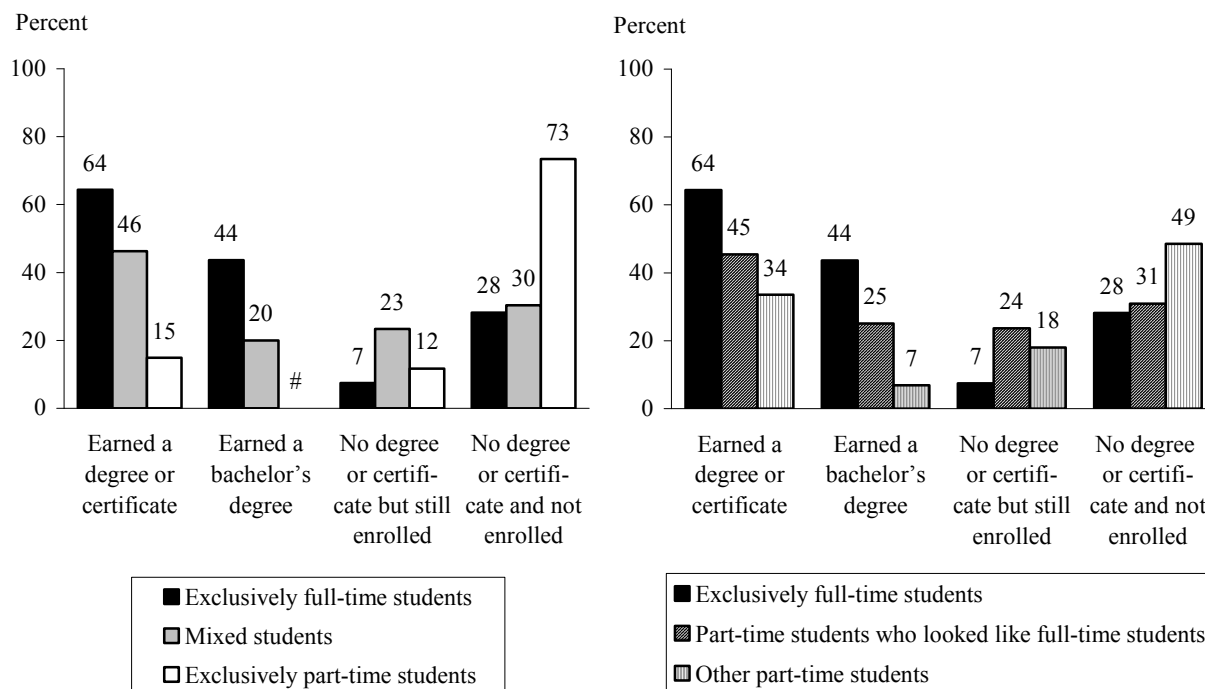
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003–04 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:04).

persistence. Looking at 1995–96 beginning students who attended school exclusively part time for the duration of their enrollment through 2000–01, 15 percent had completed a degree or certificate by 2001; none had earned a bachelor's degree; 27 percent persisted (either had earned a degree or were still enrolled); a total of 73 percent had left without earning a degree; and 46 percent had left during the first year (figure F). In contrast, 64 percent of exclusively full-time students had completed a degree or certificate, 44 percent had earned a bachelor's degree, 72 percent persisted, 28 percent had left without a degree, and 12 percent had left during the first year. Although part-time

students who looked like full-time students appeared to be more successful than other part-time students with respect to these same outcomes, they lagged behind their full-time counterparts in overall degree attainment (45 vs. 64 percent) and bachelor's degree completion (25 vs. 44 percent).

Part-time enrollment was negatively associated with students' postsecondary outcomes even after controlling for a wide range of related factors, including students' demographic and family backgrounds, academic preparation, and enrollment and employment characteristics. Regardless of whether they

**Figure F. Percentage of 1995–96 beginning postsecondary students who had earned a degree/certificate or a bachelor’s degree, who had not earned a degree but were still enrolled, and who had not earned a degree and were not enrolled, by enrollment intensity: 2001**



# Rounds to zero.

NOTE: Estimates include students from the 50 states, DC, and Puerto Rico. Standard error tables are available at <http://nces.ed.gov/das/library/reports.asp>.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 1996/01 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS:96/01).

looked like full-time students, exclusively part-time students lagged far behind their full-time peers in terms of overall degree completion, bachelor’s degree completion, and persistence toward a degree after controlling for many related factors. Mixed enrollment students also lagged behind their full-time peers with respect to bachelor’s degree completion, although significant differences in their rates for overall degree attainment and persistence could not be detected after controlling for related factors.

Were factors related to degree attainment and persistence consistent across student groups? To address this question, separate commonality

analyses were conducted for full-time students, part-time students who looked like full-time students, and other part-time students. The results of these analyses reveal both similarities and differences among these groups of students. First, across all three groups, some factors consistently had a negative association with students’ postsecondary outcomes. These factors reflect poor academic preparation (i.e., remedial coursetaking and low scores on college entrance examinations), low commitment to postsecondary education (i.e., taking breaks in enrollment, low expectations for postsecondary education), concentrations in subbaccalaureate degree programs, and priority given to work

over study (i.e., students always considering themselves as employees or changing their primary role from students to employees). It is noteworthy that although students who took breaks in their enrollment had lower rates of degree attainment across all three groups, these students consistently had higher rates of persistence.

Not all factors were consistently related to students' postsecondary outcomes across all three groups of students. For example, gender was a significant factor (favoring females) for full-time students, but not for the two subgroups of part-time students. Full-time students who initially attended private doctoral institutions had better postsecondary outcomes than their peers who entered public doctoral institutions; however, for the two subgroups of part-time students, those initially attending private 4-year nondoctoral institutions had better outcomes than those who entered public doctoral institutions. Full-time students without degree goals had lower rates of degree attainment than those with bachelor's degree expectations; but this pattern was not observed among the two subgroups of part-time students (i.e., nondegree and bachelor's degree seekers both had relatively low rates of degree completion). In summary, while some factors had consistent relationships with postsecondary outcomes across all three groups, others did not. This information may be useful to postsecondary administrators in assisting them to design programs to help various groups of students

persist in their postsecondary studies and attain a degree.

## **Conclusion**

Part-time undergraduates, especially exclusively part-time students, were at a distinct disadvantage relative to those who were enrolled full time: they came from minority and low-income family backgrounds; they were not as well-prepared for college as their full-time peers; they were highly concentrated in 2-year colleges and nondegree/certificate programs; and many of them worked full time while enrolled, placed a priority on work over study, and did not enroll continuously.

In addition, the report found that part-time enrollment was negatively associated with long-term persistence and degree attainment even after controlling for a wide range of factors related to these outcomes. This was the case even for the group of students with characteristics that fit the typical profile of a full-time student (i.e., age 23 or younger, financially dependent on parents, graduated from high school with a regular diploma, and received financial help from parents to pay for postsecondary education); regardless of whether they resembled full-time students, part-time students (especially exclusively part-time students) lagged behind their full-time peers in terms of their postsecondary outcomes even after controlling for a variety of related factors.