

Research Matters

Your Research Newsletter

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Introduction

In the 2006-2007 academic year over one third of UW Colleges students were enrolled exclusively part-time. The Colleges has the highest rate of part-time enrollment among all University of Wisconsin institutions. The task of engaging these students poses significant challenges. They come to us with a mixture of goals and aspirations, with many of them “trying-on” the role of college student to see if it fits.

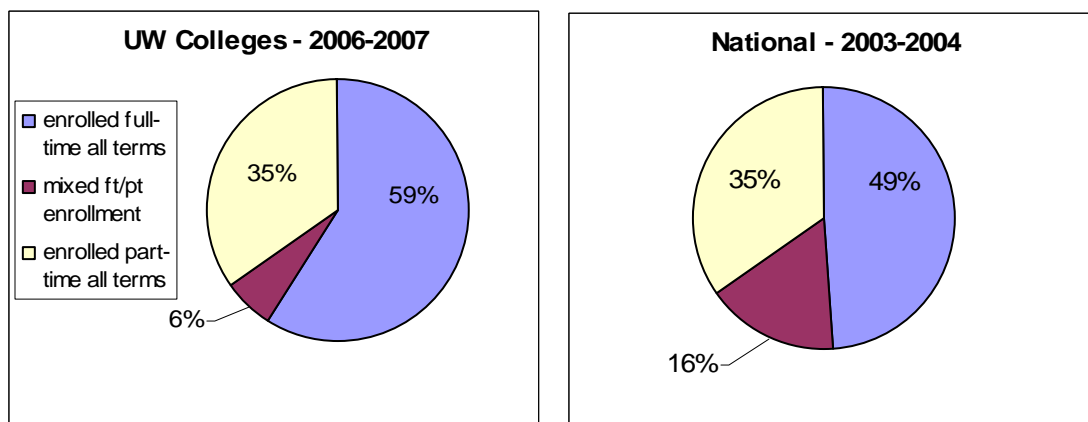
In this edition of Research Matters we compare the status of UW Colleges’ part-time students with a national perspective presented in a report titled *Part-Time Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education: 2003-04* published by the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) of the US Department of Education (full report at: <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2007165>).

This report describes the demographic, academic and employment characteristics that differentiate part-time from full-time students, and compares the educational outcomes for these two groups. It draws on two information sources: The 2003-2004 *National Student Aid Study*, and the 1996-2001 *Beginning Post-Secondary Students Longitudinal Study*. When drawing comparisons, UW Colleges data has been drawn from the period 2006-2007 and the period Fall 1995 – Spring 2001. Our hope is that this review will inform the continuing conversation within the Colleges about the ways we can help all students, regardless of their credit load, attain their post-secondary educational goals.

The Demographics of Part-time Enrollment

Over the past 30 years part-time students have become an ever larger portion of the undergraduate population in U.S. postsecondary institutions. In Fall 2004, 5.5 million undergraduates were enrolled part-time in the United States, making up 37 percent of the undergraduate enrollment in all degree-granting postsecondary institutions. In the NCES study enrolled students from the 2003-2004 academic year were divided into three groups: exclusively full-time students (students enrolled full-time in all terms of enrollment in the 2003-2004 year); exclusively part-time students; and students who were both full- and part-time over the course of the academic year.

Table 1
Enrollment Status



As shown in Table 1, the rate of exclusively part-time enrollment in the Colleges is identical to the national rate, with relatively fewer students in the Colleges mixing full-time with part-time enrollment.

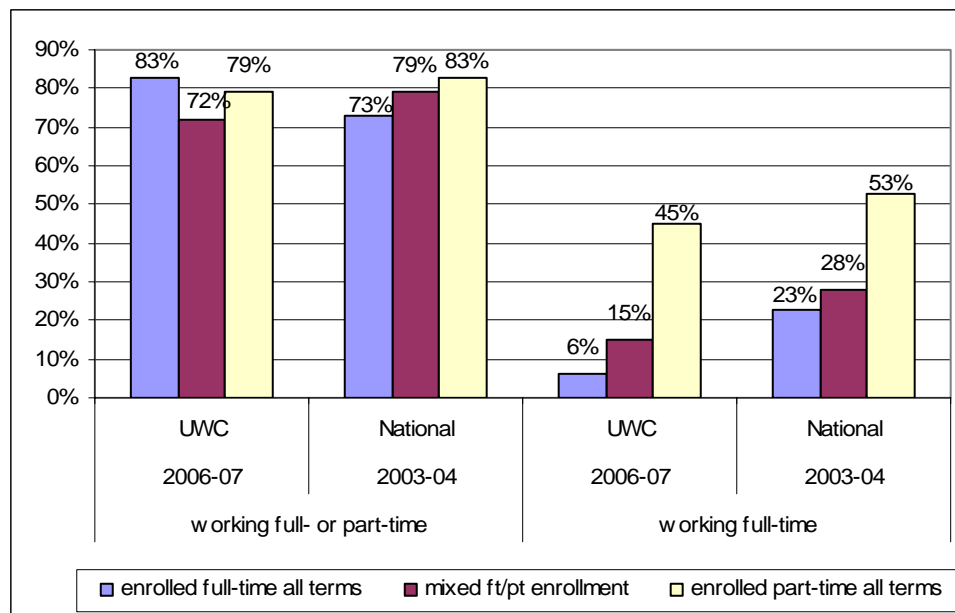
In both the national study and in the UW Colleges data, certain demographic characteristics were found to be associated with part-time enrollment:

- Non-traditional age students (22 and older for UWC; 24 and older for national study) were much more likely to be part-time students than traditional age students (in the Colleges, 65% of non-traditional age students were part-time versus 18% of traditional age students).
- Black, Hispanic and Native American students were somewhat more likely to be enrolled part-time than were Asian or white students (45% of black students; 38% of both Hispanic and Native American students, as compared to 29% of Asian students and 34% of white students in the UW Colleges).
- Females were more likely than males to be part-time (39% of females versus 29% of males in the Colleges data).

Combining School and Work

While high percentages of both full- and part-time students work while enrolled, the amount of work is a significant factor in distinguishing part-time students from their full-time counterparts. As shown in Table 2, 45% of UW Colleges part-time students are working full-time compared to only 6% of full-time students (in the national data the corresponding numbers are 53% and 23% respectively).

Table 2
Percentage of Students Working with Percentage Working Full-time



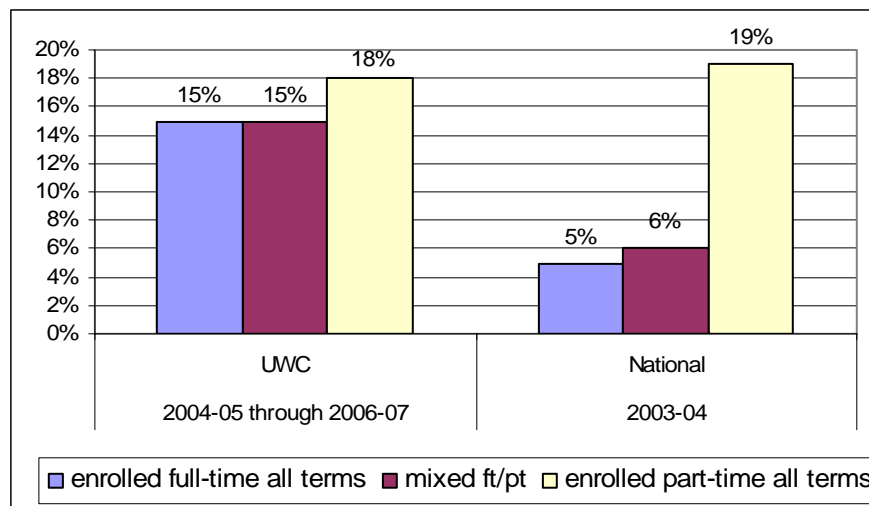
This difference in work habits may explain another distinguishing characteristic of part-time students. In the NCES study, 47% of exclusively part-time students considered themselves primarily employees, as compared to 14% of exclusively full-time students.

Students work despite an awareness of the academic limitations imposed by work. Between 1/3 and 1/2 of students in the NCES study said that working restricted their academic choices (class schedule, number of classes, access to facilities) and had a negative impact on their grades. Exclusively part-time students were more likely to report these problems than full-time students. For those who identified themselves as primarily students, the main reason for working among both full- and part-time students was paying for college (tuition, fees and living expenses), although full-time students were more likely than part-time students to cite earning spending money as a reason for working.

Academic Aspirations, Persistence and Degree Attainment

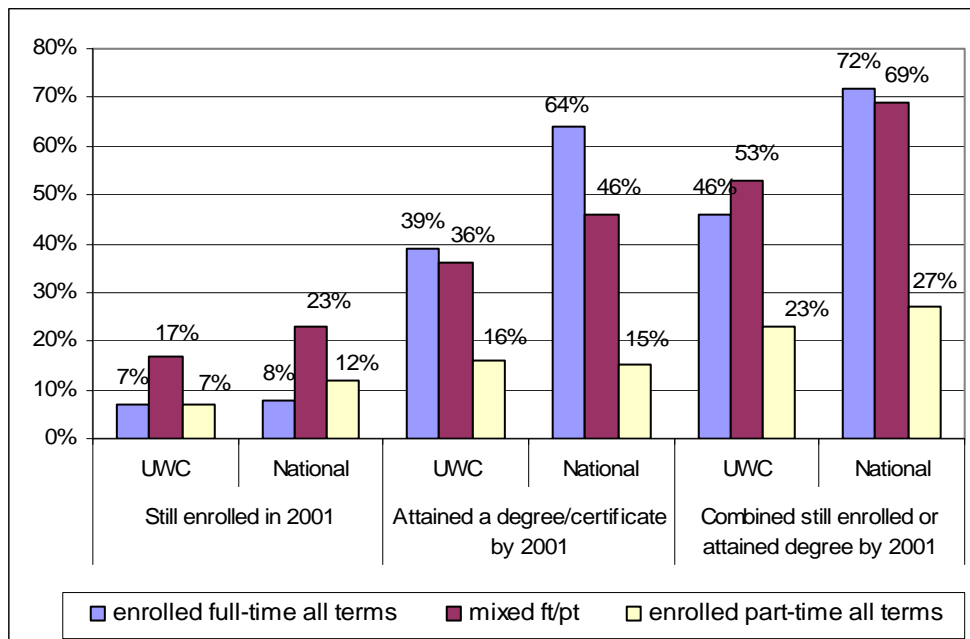
The academic aspirations of students are an important clue to understanding persistence and outcomes. The study found that part-time students were far more likely not to be enrolled in a degree program than the other two categories of students. (19.2 percent, versus 5.1 percent for full-time, and 6.2 for mixed). The differences between these three groups were much less striking in the Colleges (see Table 3 below). Note: UW Colleges data is compiled from an annual survey of student goals and intentions. Students answer the questions, “Do you intend to earn an Associates degree from this campus?” and, “Do you intend to earn a Bachelor’s degree from any college or university?”

Table 3
Students Not Seeking a Degree
{ Associate’s or Bachelor’s }



Using longitudinal data from the *1995-96 through 2000-2001 Beginning Post-Secondary Students Longitudinal Study*, the NCES study found that part-time enrollment was negatively associated with long-term degree attainment and persistence, even when controlling for other related factors (see Table 4). This finding is consistent with earlier research. Exclusively part-time students were characterized by low rates of persistence with the greatest attrition occurring prior to the start of the second year. Even allowing for the differences in academic aspiration described above, exclusively part-time students were far less likely than exclusively full-time or mixed full and part-time students to have earned a degree or certificate (15% versus 64% and 46% respectively).

Table 4
Persistence and Degree Attainment for 1995-1996 New Freshmen



Note: UWC data includes enrollment and degree attainment within the UW System only

Conclusion

The NCES Study *Part-Time Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education: 2003-04* describes a part-time student experience that differs significantly from that of full-time students, particularly in the areas of employment and academic outcomes. This description is confirmed by the experiences of part-time students in the UW Colleges. Part-time students are much more likely to work full-time. These students work long hours despite their awareness of adverse consequences like limited class choices and a negative impact on grades. They are much more likely to consider themselves primarily employees, as opposed to primarily students. And, like their full-time counterparts, the reason they most frequently give for working is to pay for college. The combined effect of working long hours to pay for college, suffering the adverse academic consequences caused by excessive work, and a weaker self-identification as a student, challenges campuses seeking to increase engagement among part-time students in the learning process.

When measuring outcomes, both the national and UW Colleges data confirm a negative association between part-time enrollment and long-term degree attainment and persistence, even after controlling for other factors. Part-time students are far less likely than mixed enrollment or full-time students to earn a degree or certificate, with most leaving school prior to the start of the second year.