



Community college students who enroll full-time for even one semester are more likely to graduate

By Meredith Kolodner

For community college students struggling to finish their degrees, even one semester of full-time enrollment can make a difference, a [report](#) released Wednesday suggests.

Students who switch between full- and part-time are more likely to graduate than those who only go part-time – 34 percent compared with 23 percent. And students who go full-time their first semester are more likely to make it through their gateway math and English classes and return after their first year, even if they switch to part-time later.

This matters, because most community college students aren't able to go full time all the way through. Only 18 percent go full-time continuously, compared with 54 percent who combined part- and full-time semesters, according to the report.

And given the racial gap in college graduation rates, it's notable that black and Latino students are the least likely to go full-time continuously, at 12 percent and 9 percent respectively.

So an obvious solution would be for all students to go full-time, right? Well, that may be oversimplifying the issue. Many students would prefer to go full-time but can't due to family responsibilities, financial constraints or both. Some state financial aid programs have seized on the full-time solution and structured their scholarships to reward full-time enrollment. But do these "solutions" help the students most in need?

For example, New York's new "free tuition" program for state colleges and universities purports to make a college education more affordable. The Excelsior Scholarship tries to encourage on-time completion by requiring students to take a full-time course load of 30 credits per year.

But here's where it gets sticky. New York's Excelsior Scholarship doesn't cover fees or housing, which is what often makes college unaffordable for low-income students, as Robert Kelchen, a professor of higher education at Seton Hall University [notes](#). Fees and housing can really add up at the State University of New York (SUNY). "For

example, [at SUNY-Albany](#), tuition is \$6,470 and fees are \$2,793, while [Hostos Community College](#) charges \$4,800 in tuition per year for a full-time student alongside \$406 in fees,” Kelchen writes.

So lower-income students could end up in a tough bind – they might need to cut their course load so they can work more hours to afford the cost of college, but if they do that, they lose the scholarship. (Very low-income students who qualify for Pell and a state aid program known as TAP won’t have access to Excelsior, since it is a “last dollar” scholarship, meaning it only kicks in after all other aid has been exhausted.)

Supporters [argue](#) that research shows that taking 30 credits helps students graduate, regardless of socio-economic background, and that graduating with some loans is better than not graduating at all.